

**The Individual Under the Transgender Umbrella: An Exploration of Themes in  
Nonbinary Gender Identity Development**

Shelley Eisenberg

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of  
The Chicago School of Professional Psychology  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Clinical Psychology

Dr. Braden Berkey, Chairperson

Dr. Pamela Niesluchowski, Reader

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2020

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### **Abstract**

Currently in the West, we categorize sex and gender on a binary system. This results in the common gender identity categories of cisgender, someone whose birth sex aligns with their gender identity, and transgender, someone who identifies their gender as the opposite of their birth sex. Research has shown that sex and gender are in fact complex and multidimensional, leaving our traditional binary system inadequate in capturing the various sex and genders that exist (Keener, 2015). Additionally, the number of individuals identifying as nonbinary is increasing, and these identities are becoming more visible (Barr et al., 2016; James et al., 2016; Mikalson et al., 2012). Despite the increase in awareness and visibility of nonbinary gender identities, there is still widespread confusion about varying gender identities accompanied by a lack of representation of these identities in society, the media, and research. The purpose of this study was to explore the identity development experiences of those who hold a nonbinary gender identity through a narrative inquiry. Participants within the study engaged in 90- to 120-min semistructured qualitative interviews using a questionnaire created based on a narrative inquiry guide. An analysis of the interview transcripts revealed 11 themes of nonbinary gender identity development and four themes related to other considerations. Although themes emerged, each participant's experience of their gender identity was nonlinear, complex, and unique. Similarly, the limiting nature of our current binary system and the difference between binary transgender identity development and nonbinary gender identity development was apparent.

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## **Chapter 1: Nature of the Study**

The purpose of the current study was to explore themes in the development of nonbinary gender identities. This is significant because the number of individuals identifying as nonbinary is increasing, and these identities are becoming more visible (Barr et al., 2016; James et al., 2016; Mikalson et al., 2012). Thus far, research on, as well as our understanding of, nonbinary gender identities is lacking. Similarly, the Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues recommends that future research include questions about gender beyond “male,” “female,” and “transgender” (American Psychological Association [APA], 2015), due to the current underrepresentation of nonbinary gender identities.

There are numerous stage models that outline transgender identity development (Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Devor, 2004; Lev, 2004). These models help to illuminate what an individual goes through when discovering a noncisgender identity. However, these models highlight those with a binary transgender development experience and do not capture the gender identity development of someone who is not cisgender and is also not binary transgender. This work will contribute to professional knowledge and practice by clarifying nonbinary gender identities and proposing themes in development of a nonbinary gender identity. This clarity and identification of thematic elements of development in nonbinary gender identities will be discussed in order to further understand these individuals’ identity and identity development.

### **Problem Statement**

Awareness surrounding differing sexual orientations and gender identities has been increasing since the early 1990s due to greater visibility in society and the media, as well as more access to information about varying sexual orientations and gender identities from online resources (Ryan, 2014). Despite this increase in awareness, there is still widespread confusion

about varying gender identities accompanied by a lack of representation of these identities in society, the media, and research.

While sex and gender are often used as synonyms, they are actually two separate concepts. Sex is determined by an individual's chromosomes and genitals, while gender is determined by social and cultural contexts of maleness and femaleness (Diamond, 2002). Sex is comprised of the biological systems of X and Y chromosomes, pre/postnatal sexual differentiation, and hormones that influence sexual differentiation of genitals, which is the basis of sex assigned at birth. On the other hand, gender is comprised of sociocultural systems, norms/expectations, identity, femininity, masculinity, and gender nonconformity (Hyde et al., 2019). Furthermore, sex and gender typically are assumed to operate in a binary system where society categorizes sex and gender as exclusively falling into one of two categories (male/female, man/woman; APA, 2015). Due to the sex and gender binary system, the intersectionality of birth sex and gender identity often results in an individual possessing a cisgender identity, or one's gender identity being aligned with birth sex, or a transgender identity, or one's gender identity being misaligned with birth sex. Despite this, nonbinary gender identities that do not fall within the strict categories of our gender binary system continue to emerge and persist. Sex and gender are complex and multidimensional, leaving our traditional binary system inadequate in capturing the various sex and genders that exist (Keener, 2015). In fact, recent research has classified individuals' sex and gender as unique "mosaics" of biological and psychological characteristics that cannot be accurately captured by rigid, limited categories (Hyde et al., 2019).

Currently, nonnormative sexual orientations and gender identities are aggregated together, resulting in the ever-expanding acronym, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender). This associates lesbian, gay, and bisexual sexual orientations with transgender gender identity

solely on the basis that they are nonnormative (i.e., heterosexual and cisgender). In fact, although they are commonly aggregated, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identities are vastly different. Similarly, nonnormative gender identities, such as agender, nonconforming, and nonbinary identities, are also aggregated together under the umbrella term transgender, again solely on the basis that they are nonnormative (i.e., not cisgender). There is a spectrum of gender identities that possess differing characteristics, and the term transgender does not adequately capture their nuances (Rosenblum & Travis, 2008).

While this confusion about and lack of representation of gender identity is a notable result of the complex and multidimensional nature of sex and gender, it results in gaps in current research surrounding nonbinary gender identities and subsequent gaps in the understanding of these identities (Keener, 2015). In the current research on gender identity, nonbinary identities continue to be associated with transgender identity and, thus, become unrepresented not only in literature, but in the greater scope of gender identity as a whole. For example, there are numerous stage models for transgender identity development (Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Devor, 2004; Lev, 2004). In these models, transgender identity development is discussed as a process of discovering transgender identity and culminates with a transition from sex and gender assigned at birth to the “opposite” sex and gender. While these models are essential in highlighting one type of transgender identity development, they do not encompass the development of all gender variant identities. If these identities are not separated and discussed as different from one another, research will continue to overlook their nuances and confusion and lack of representation will remain.

On another note, the identification of differing gender identities reveals potential issues in the current understanding of gender and subsequent gender norms and expectations. At the

present time, Western society views gender as a binary that produces gender norms and gendered ways of categorizing our world. When infants are assigned male or female at birth, their sex and subsequent gender is currently based solely on the appearance of their genitals. The presence or absence of a piece of flesh informs the child's expected behaviors and interests due to the current conceptualization of what it means to be male or female.

The presence of trans and nonbinary gender identities produces many key challenges to our current gender binary system. As trans and nonbinary gender identities become more visible, it is clear that the current assumption that people will self-label their gender category (male/female) with their sex assigned at birth, based on genitals and then conform to gender stereotypes, roles, and expectations associated with their assigned gender category is inaccurate (Hyde et al., 2019). By claiming a nonbinary gender identity, an individual is empowered to reject the rigidity of gender norms and the expectations that are placed upon them based on their birth sex. With the presence of these gender variant identities, birth sex assignment is not adequate in predicting a person's self-labeled gender identity. Similarly, nonbinary identities challenge our assumption that gender is a dichotomous category (Hyde et al., 2019). Trans and nonbinary gender identities in and of themselves highlight the deficiency of the current gender binary system.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In the present study, the experiences of individuals who hold nonbinary gender identities were explored. Through this study, I constructed a narrative of these individuals' experiences that include their contextual influences and epiphanies surrounding their gender identity formation. The current study explored the development of nonbinary gender identities and distinguished it from the development associated with transgender identities. Similarly, I

highlighted how our current, rigid, binary system has influenced nonbinary individuals' gender identity development. With this work, I believe future researchers and clinicians will be enabled and encouraged to accurately and adequately account for the various gender identities of their participants and clients. Similarly, I hope this work will help broaden its readers' understanding of the various gender identities that exist.

### **Research Questions**

The guiding questions for this study were as follows:

1. What are prevalent themes that occur in the development of a nonbinary gender identity?
2. What are the clinical implications of developing and holding an authentic gender identity?

### **Definition of Key Terms**

*AFAB/AMAB.* Assigned female/male at birth (APA, 2015).

*Cisgender.* Gender identity that matches social expectations of the sex they were assigned at birth (e.g., A person assigned female at birth, who identifies as a girl/woman; APA, 2015).

*Gender binary system.* System by which society categorizes gender as falling into one of two categories (man/woman, male/ female, masculine/feminine; APA, 2015).

*Nonbinary gender identities.* Gender identities that do not fall exclusively in man/male or woman/female categories. Some examples include genderqueer, gender fluid, agender, and bigender. Within non-Western cultures, individuals from groups such as Two Spirit people, Fa'afafine, or Hijra are sometimes considered to comprise a "third" gender, but may or may not identify as nonbinary or transgender (APA, 2015).

*Transgender identity.* Although transgender identity is utilized as an umbrella term for nonnormative gender identities, for the purpose of this study, it will be defined as a person whose gender identity is “opposite” of the sex the person was assigned at birth.

*Transsexual.* An outdated term that is still preferred by transgender individuals who have changed or desire to change their bodies through medical interventions (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation [GLAAD], 2016).

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Western Socialization of Binary Gender through a Feminist Lens**

In Western society, there is currently a binary view of sex and gender. This is often highlighted and explored by feminist theorists who aim to uncover biases that are embedded in our current understanding of gender (Crawford & Marecek, 1989). Through this work, feminist theory differentiates sex from gender while highlighting the social construction of gender and its subsequent effects. Although feminist theory is often utilized to conceptualize cisgender and transgender identity and experience, it is also an applicable framework for nonbinary identities due to its deconstruction of gender and the acknowledgement of our propensity toward “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Similarly, feminist theory rejects the imposition of labels and encourages first person narratives and “bottom up” explorations.

While gender is often assumed to be something inherent in human beings, it is in fact socially constructed. For most people, talking about gender is “the equivalent of fish talking about water” (Lorber & Farrell, 1991, p. 111). Because gender is so pervasive and engrained in people, many do not question it and assume it is bred in their genes (Lorber & Farrell, 1991). In contrast, a person’s gender identity is created through social interactions and is constantly evolving (Lorber & Farrell, 1991). This social construction of gender identity begins at birth when an individual is assigned a sex based on the appearance of their genitalia (Lorber & Farrell, 1991). Starting as young children, gender status is created through gendered names, dress, and other gender markers from gendered hairstyle to gendered activities (Lorber & Farrell, 1991). Through this, a child’s gender becomes evident, people begin to treat them differently based on their gender, and subsequently children respond to this differing treatment by feeling and behaving differently (Lorber & Farrell, 1991). Children then begin to categorize themselves

based on gender, gendered norms and expectations shape sexual feelings and desires at puberty, and people learn that people with different genders work specific types of jobs (Lorber & Farrell, 1991). Due to our current tendency to heighten perceptual discriminability of gender/sex through gender markers and the use of linguistic labeling of binary gender/sex, gender and sex emerge as psychologically salient and meaningful dimensions of human variation. They are not an inevitable result of an innate mechanism but instead are a result of societal practices that guarantee that people categorize themselves and others into the gender binary (Hyde et al., 2019).

From there, due to social influence, individuals are expected to follow a traditional gender model (Lev, 2013). In this traditional gender model, an individual who is assigned male at birth would then be assumed to identify their gender as a man, possess masculine gender roles, and have romantic relationships with women. Similarly, an individual assigned female at birth would be assumed to identify their gender as woman, possess feminine gender roles, and date men (Lev, 2013). This model is pervasive in the current conceptualization of sexual orientation and gender identity. It provides a social standard of identification and behaviors for a person's gender, gender roles, and sexual orientation based on their sex, and does not leave much room for authentic development.

Due to this traditional gender model, the social construction of gender does not stop at a label of male or female at birth but extends into gender norms and roles that are expected to be acted out daily. This is often referred to as "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126) or performative gender. This is the notion that due to Western societies' rigid ideals of what it means to be male or female, gender can often become a performance that is solidified through a stylized repetition of acts (Butler, 2006). While women and men are seen as having distinctive

psychological and behavioral tendencies due to their reproductive functions (West & Zimmerman, 1987), “doing gender” suggests that perceived differences among genders are not necessarily inherent but instead are an acquired set of behaviors and practices that are learned from caregivers and other social influences (Deutsch, 2007). These gendered behaviors and roles are typically maintained in order to avoid judgment surrounding the normative standards of an individual’s sex category. This fear of judgment is enough to make people comply with gender norms and roles and is integral in understanding why many individuals do not resist (Fenstermaker, West, & Zimmerman, 2002). Through this process, the gender binary is created and maintained.

For over a century, gender and sex differences were researched by psychologists who legitimized the gender binary. The differences model, or “sex differences approach” (Thorne, 1980), argues that there are two genders, male and female, and that these genders are extremely different psychologically (Hyde, 2005). Statements such as “girls and boys play differently...they learn differently...they fight differently...they hear differently (Sax, 2005, p. 28) resulted from often small findings of average gender differences and implied there was no overlap in female and male behavior. While the masses remain particularly captivated with gender differences, current gender and sex research is beginning to challenge overinflated claims of gender differences. The gender similarities hypothesis postulates that, contrary to popular belief, males and females are actually mostly similar in regard to their psychological characteristics (Hyde, 2005). This hypothesis is backed by sizable corroboration from meta-analyses of research on gender differences. These meta-analyses of research on gender differences concludes that claims that genders are mostly different are not consistent with scientific data (Hyde, 2005). This is not only true in regard to psychological similarity but also in

regard to neurology and endocrinology, aspects of humans that are assumed to be sexually dimorphic (Hyde et al., 2019). The differences model as well as the gender similarities hypothesis are important considerations when exploring gender variance. These concepts help to explain why the gender binary system still exists and why it is no longer working.

In response to the rigidity and deficiency of the traditional gender model along with notion that genders are more similar than different, current research has come up with an authentic gender model. In this model, sex, gender role, gender identity, and sexual attraction all fall on a spectrum and do not follow a rigid, linear development that the traditional gender model assumes (Make It Work & Wellstone, 2009). In this model, someone who is assigned female at birth can identify their gender identity as nonbinary, their gender role as masculine, and their sexual orientation as queer (Hyde et al., 2019). This model leaves room for genuine development and does not assume aspects about a person's life based on their biological sex. These concepts, coupled with other attempts to undo gender, could result in a less gendered world with less detrimental effects caused by rigid gender norms.

Along with this, literature is uncovering that if gender can be “done” it can also be “undone” (Deutsch, 2007). When research shifts its focus to social interactions that reduce gender difference, we can start to undo gender (Deutsch, 2007). A way in which people are “undoing” gender is by pushing back on the current binary system of gender and sex through the emergence of gender variant identities. This variance is seen in transgender and nonbinary identities in Western society as well in other cultures. While Western culture continues to expand its understanding and acceptance of varying gender identities, it is helpful to look at the presence and perception of gender variance in other parts of the world.

### **Transgender Identity Worldwide**

In non-Western cultures, there are numerous examples of male-to-female transgender gender identities. In Madagascar, *Sekrata* refers to young boys who, due to the possession of a more feminine appearance, are raised as girls (Nanda, 2014). Similarly, in the Philippines, *Bakla* are biological males who dress, act, and adopt roles of women while speaking their own language with a hyper-feminized inflection (Nanda, 2014). This concept of biological men wearing female clothes and adopting the mannerisms and social roles of women can also be seen in Tonga with *Fakaleitis*, in Samoa with *Fa'afafines*, and in Islamic nations with the *Xanith of Oman* (Pettersen et al., 2016).

In other parts of the world, there is a utility to this male-to-female gender variance. In Italy, *Femmineiellos* are biological males who assume female gender roles. They are considered privileged in society and play a crucial role in rituals, such as marriage ceremonies (Zito, 2013). In the Ottoman Empire, *Kocek* were men who dressed as women and danced in sexually suggestive ways as employed entertainers (Popescu-Judetz, 1982). In Ethiopia, *Ashtimes* are biological men who live in the homes of spiritual and political leaders due to the prohibition of biological women's presence. These individuals perform domestic duties and are compensated for their work (Pettersen et al., 2016). In these examples, biological males adopting feminine roles and dress serves a function in society.

Similarly, there are many instances of female-to-male transgender gender identities in other parts of the world. In Benin, *Minos* are female warriors who are perceived to have masculine, aggressive traits and remain unmarried and childless. *Ninauposkitzipxpe* is a gender identity in the North Peigan tribe of the Blackfoot Confederacy where women are considered

“manly hearted” due to their possession of bold and aggressive masculine characteristics (Maltz & Archambault, 1995).

In certain nations, biological females adopting male dress, traits, and social roles can be beneficial. The *Ninauposkitzipxpe* (discussed above) are unrestricted by social constraints placed on women due to their status as “manly hearted women.” In Albania, *Burrnesha* are biological women who are “sworn virgins” who live as men in order to gain the benefits of men in a highly patriarchal society (Young, 2000). Throughout the world, there are instances where biological females taking on the roles, traits, and dress of men is advantageous. In patriarchal societies, women who identify as male have been referred to as “transvestic opportunists” due to the nature of patriarchal cultures where masculinity, maleness, and being a man provides privileges to individuals (Lev, 2013).

### **Nonbinary Identity Worldwide**

Along with other examples of male-to-female and female-to-male gender variance in other nations, there are examples of nonbinary gender identity in other parts of the world as well. In the Navajo tribe, *Two Spirits* are individuals that are said to embody both genders (Jacobs et al., 1997). *Nadleehi* are biological males that manifest both genders while *Dilbaa* are biological females who personify both male and female genders (Jacobs et al., 1997). In Native Hawaii, *Mahu* refer to individuals who also are said to be both male and female (Odo et al., 2001). The *Kothoeyes* of Thailand are said to be neither male nor female but individuals who occupy the space between genders (Nanda, 2014). In Indonesia, *Bissu* are individuals who are considered to transcend gender and either embody all genders or none at all (Davies, 2006). Lastly, the Dominican Republic has a genetically based third sex called *Guevedoche* (Imperato-McGinley et al., 1974). These individuals possess a “pseudohermaphroditic trait,” which results in their being

perceived and raised girls until they begin to express male traits at puberty. Instead of going through a process of transitioning or beginning to identify as male, they live as a third gender with distinct social roles constructed for them (Imperato-McGinley et al., 1974).

### **Perception of Gender Variant Identities Worldwide**

While the presence of gender variance in other nations is clear, national views of transgender and nonbinary gender identities are conflicting. In some nations, individuals who possess gender variant identities are viewed highly in society. Italian *Femmineiellos* are valued and participate in crucial ceremonies such as weddings (Zito, 2013). On the other hand, in Thailand, gender variant *Kathoeyes* are said to produce anxiety across the nation and are said to be linked to the nation's degeneracy (Käng, 2012). *Koceks*, *Hijiras*, and *Warias* are gender variant individuals from the Ottoman Empire, South Asia, and Indonesia, respectively, and are commonly viewed by the nation as low status sex workers (Nanda, 2014). Although variant gender identities exist in many nations, the implications for and perception of individuals with nonbinary gender identity differs from culture to culture.

### **Transgender Identity in the West**

In Western society, scholars and activists have conceptualized transgender identity in many ways. While transgender identity is commonly viewed as a full transition from one binary gender to another, it is an umbrella term that is also used to account for any individual who is gender-blending and gender-bending (Davidson, 2007). Transgender identity acknowledges that there is an intersection between birth sex and gender identity as well as the notion that birth sex and gender identity are not always coherent (Nataf, 1996). Similarly, while *transgender* is often associated with *transition* from one gender to another, it also is associated with *transgression* and *transcendence* of the gender binary (Bornstein, 1998). This includes transsexual individuals (at

any operative stage), cross-dressers, drag kings and queens, genderqueer people, LGB individuals who cross gender lines, and anyone who falls from the straight and narrow in regard to binary sex and gender (Davidson, 2007).

While transgender identity has been cited as an umbrella term for all gender variance in Western society, it has been said that there “is consensus about the umbrella model but there is no consensus about what that means in practice” (Davidson, 2007, p. 61) Transgender identity is a powerful and useful tool for classifying the range of people that fall under the metaphorical umbrella and therefore fall outside of binary sex and gender and the cultural norms they produce. But, in this way, transgender identity encompasses an unfixed group of people with immense differences. For this reason, the current study explored elements of nonbinary gender identities, specifically.

### **Nonbinary Identity in the West**

Nonbinary gender identity falls under the umbrella term of transgender identity while possessing specific characteristics (APA, 2015). It is estimated that nonbinary individuals make up 25-35% (or more) of transgender populations (Barr et al., 2016; James et al., 2016; Mikalson et al., 2012). While binary transgender people are transgender folks who still identify their gender within the gender binary system, nonbinary gender identities enable people to deny the current Western binary system of sex and gender (Davidson, 2007). Aside from possessing a nonbinary gender identity, there are people who are intersex or have diversity/disorder of sexual development (DSD) and therefore possess physical/biological sexual characteristics that fall outside the binary (Roen, 2015). Although intersex individuals have biological sex characteristics that fall outside of the binary, a majority of individuals who are intersex or have DSD identify their gender within the binary as man or woman (Harper, 2007; Richards &

Barker, 2013). On the other hand, there are people who are not intersex or do not have DSD that identify their gender outside the binary, as nonbinary.

Gender identities can be further broken down depending on whether an individual feels they are both male and female (androgynous, mixed gender, pan-gender), between genders (bigender, gender fluid), between more than two genders (trigender), a specific additional gender (third gender, other gender), disavowing the gender dichotomy completely (genderqueer, genderfuck), or possessing no gender at all (agender, gender neutral, non-gendered, genderless, neuter, neutrois; Richards et al., 2016). Multiple studies have found an influx of gender identities that do not fall under the binary understanding of gender. Bockting (2008) found 1,229 transgender individuals who fell outside the binary and possessed a variety of gender identity labels. Similarly, Hines (2007) found numerous quotes from participants with nonbinary identities that were subsumed under the umbrella term of genderqueer. These nonbinary identities often come with preferred pronouns such as they/their/them/themselves instead of he/his/him/himself or she/her/her/herself. Despite commonalities of certain pronouns used by nonbinary individuals to reflect and capture their gender experience, the only way to know a person's preferred pronouns is to ask them (Richards & Barker, 2013).

Connell (2005), Monro (2007, 2010), and Engel (2002) discussed the following ways in which genderqueer and nonbinary people participate in their identity, such as stretching, diversifying gender, dissolution or negation of sex difference, and creating ambiguity. *Stretching* refers to making feminine and masculine identity categories more flexible. For example, a person who was assigned male at birth can identify as nonbinary and possess a gender expression that is feminine through wearing dresses and makeup. *Diversifying gender* results from individuals whose interaction of sex characteristics, subjective gender experiences, and expressions

contribute to a continuum of gender. This could look like a person who was assigned female at birth, experiences their gender as nonbinary, and yet still expresses their gender in a feminine way. *Dissolution or negation of sex difference* is an entire movement towards a social order that is nongendered. Lastly, *Creating ambiguity* is the expression of gender in a way that defies a sex assignment that is fixed over the lifespan. For example, a person who was assigned male at birth, then at a point in time identifies as a binary transwoman, and then identifies as nonbinary with a more feminine gender expression.

### **Perception of Gender Variant Identities in the West**

The existence of gender variance in the West is prevalent but perceptions of these identities are also varied, although a majority are negative. In the field of psychology, variant gender identities are considered pathological. In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), gender dysphoria, or a marked incongruence between one's experience/expressed gender and their assigned gender, is included and therefore classified as a mental disorder (APA, 2013). While this pathologizing gives individuals who experience variant gender identities access to medical treatment, the label of a mental disorder is inherently stigmatizing. Because of the identification of transgender identity as pathological, current gender research often separates out trans people and they are looked at as outside of mainstream gender considerations. This leads researchers to miss important aspects of how gender organizes and functions. Integration of the variety of gender identities will uncover new experiences that cannot be highlighted when cisgender experiences are the focus and transgender experiences are considered disordered (Hyde et al., 2019).

Although there has been improvement in the past few decades due to feminist theory and activism, Paisley Currah (2008) highlighted that the sex and gender binary is often policed.

Gender is segregated in physical spaces like bathrooms and locker rooms while also requiring that a person's sex assigned at birth and genitalia are congruent with their gender classifications on identification like birth certificates, driver's licenses, and passports. For instance, in many states, a preoperative transwoman would not be able to change her gender classifications on her birth certificate to female because she has a penis. While the understanding that gender is different from sex is increasing, there are still strong cultural attitudes and implications around gender norms and expressions. This can result in nonbinary and gender nonconforming people being disrespected in their public presentation.

Similarly, minority stress theory suggests that the experience of stigma, discrimination, and victimization causes disparities in health for minority individuals, including transgender people (Marshal et al., 2011). Stigma and prejudice is often directed toward LGBT people and therefore they experience unique stressors which cause unfavorable mental and physical health outcomes (Meyer & Frost, 2013). The minority stress model highlights that stigmatizing and prejudicial circumstances in the environment can cause stressors that LGBT people experience throughout their lives. Furthermore, recent research has shown that minority stressors impact the health of transgender and gender nonconforming individuals (Bockting et al., 2013; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Testa et al., 2015). Similarly, for transgender and gender nonconforming individuals, a unique source of stress concerns gender affirmation social interactions (Sevelius, 2013; Testa et al., 2015).

Violence against transgender individuals, such as physical assault emotional abuse, neglect, exploitation, assaulted with a weapon, sexual assault/rape, threat, and harassment, robbery, and intimidation has been documented since the late 1990s (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Cohan et al., 2006; Garofalo et al., 2006; Kenagy, 2005; Kenagy & Bostwick, 2005;

McGowan, 1999; Risser et al., 2005; Stotzer, 2009; Sugano et al., 2006; Valera et al., 2000; Virginia Department of Health, 2007; Witten, 2003; Xavier & Simmons, 2000; Xavier et al., 2005). Stotzer (2009) compiled data from self-report surveys and needs assessments, hotline call and social service records, and police reports which highlighted that violence against transgender individuals starts in early life, that they are at risk of numerous types and occurrences of violence, and that violence lasts across the lifespan. Conclusions from this data analysis indicate that transgender people are being physically and sexually assaulted at higher rates, by people they either know or do not know. They also experience higher incidences of harassment, verbal abuse, and other nonphysical violence, in and outside of their homes. Furthermore, these acts of violence happen through their lifetime, with a single individual experiencing multiple acts of violence or intolerance in one day (Stotzer, 2009).

In other studies on gender identity, perceptions of nonbinary identity have been found. Davidson (2007) stated that activists have indicated that they find identifying as nonbinary or genderqueer problematic because they believe that this identity is associated with young, mostly White, college crowds. Therefore, nonbinary identity is seen as an academic White term. This association seems to be invalidating and is seen as a product of liberalism and White privilege (Davidson, 2007). More so, this lack of seriousness has been seen as detrimental to the LGBTQ movement due to the presence of privileged young people holding this identity without acknowledging the struggles of other minorities, such as trans people of color (Davidson, 2007).

### **Stages of Gender Identity Development**

Nonbinary identities seem to be a recent and underresearched concept. Despite this, it is probable that people who have identified within the gender binary but moving across it, such as transsexual individuals, may have identified outside the binary if terminology and discourse had

been available to them (Richards et al., 2016). With this in mind, it is crucial that Western society continues to explore the nuances of gender identity in order to provide terminology and discourse to the masses. Currently, we do not have models that highlight the development of nonbinary identities. The review of stage models of nonnormative sexual orientation and gender identity development informed important considerations for me when attempting to identify themes in the unique process of nonbinary gender identity development.

Current research indicates there are multiple dynamic processes that individuals go through when developing their gender identity (Eliason & Schope, 2007; Steensma et al., 2013). The literature highlights the complex processes individuals go through when realizing a gender identity that is not cisgender. Due to the presence of complex, dynamic developmental processes, researchers have proposed models that delineate gender identity development for transgender individuals. In reviewing these intricate development models of transgender identity, considerations for the current study and its aim of identifying themes in gender nonbinary identity development will be identified.

Although nonnormative gender identity development and sexual orientation development are overlapping, research has concluded that gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct developmental processes. Gender variant individuals often go through both developmental processes, first identifying their gender identity and then identifying their sexual identity (Eliason & Schope, 2007). Research of nonnormative gender identity development is limited, but literature shows that gender variant identity usually begins with children expressing anatomic dysphoria in which they discuss disliking or not wanting aspects of their body related to their natal sex (penis/vagina/breasts). While this can often be a phase, if anatomic dysphoria begins or persists through 10 to 13 years of age, gender dysphoria will most likely be persistent (Steensma

et al., 2013). According to researchers, if gender dysphoria persistent, individuals will most likely experience one of the following models of transgender identity development.

According to Aaron Devor's (2004) model, which is based on Vivienne Cass's (1990) sexuality identity model, transgender identity formation consists of 14 stages. This identity development is specific to individuals who desire gender confirmation surgery and is based on the ideology that there are only two biological sexes. This model is based on Cass's homosexual identity formation and Ebaugh's (1998) theory of role exit, as well as the concepts of witnessing and mirroring. Cass's stages of homosexual identity formation are Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Tolerance, Acceptance, Pride, and Integration. Ebaugh theorized the process that occurs when one takes psycho-social action to disengage from one role and establish a new identity. This role exit is said to evolve in stages of Doubting, Seeking and Weighing Alternatives, Negotiating Turning Points, and Post-Exit Adjustment. Devor's model is also based with these role exit stages in mind. Lastly, Devor's model incorporates aspects of witnessing and mirroring in which individuals possess a need to be witnessed by others for who they are as well as mirrored in others' eyes as they see themselves. Devor's model was developed using the work of 20 years of sociological field research, personal experience, as well as social and professional interactions with self-identified transgender people.

Devor's (2004) transgender identity development model is as follows. *Abiding Anxiety* is when an individual possesses sex discomfort and unfocused gender which can manifest as preferences in other gender activities and friends. *Identity Confusion* highlights an individual's confusion about sex assigned at birth and their doubts about the suitability of their assigned sex. *Identity Comparison* consists of a person seeking and experimenting with other gender identities. The *Discovery of Transgender Identity* stage is when an individual comes into contact with

education/information and learns about the existence of transgender gender identity. The person is then confused about the legitimacy of transgender gender identity and the authenticity of their transgender identity in the *Identity Confusion About Transgender Identity* stage. The *Identity Comparison About Transgender Identity* occurs as an individual begins testing out a transgender identity. A person enters the *Tolerance of Transgender Identity* stage when they begin to identify as transgender. Then comes the *Delay Before Acceptance of Transgender Identity* stage in which an individual waits to confirm their transgender identity and change their current circumstances. A person then establishes their transgender identity in the *Acceptance of Transgender Identity* stage and begins to tell others about their gender identity. There is then a *Delay Before Transition* in which the individual learns about transition options and starts to set up finances and support systems in preparation for transition. A person reaches the *Transition* stage where they undergo gender and sex confirmation surgeries. An individual comes to the *Acceptance of Post-Transition Gender and Sex Identities* in which they establish their identity post transition and begin to live successfully. The *Integration* stage occurs as a person's transgender identity becomes invisible and stigma is managed. Lastly, individuals will reach the *Pride* stage where they are openly transgender and advocate for their community (Devor, 2004).

Arlene Lev (2004) proposed another model of transgender emergence. This model includes Awareness, Seeking Information/Reaching Out, Disclosure to Significant Others, Exploration: Identity and Self-Labeling, Exploration: Transition Issues/Possible Body Modification, and Integration: Acceptance and Post-Transition Issues. This model is based on the concept that complicated cultural expectations create dissonance in transgender individuals and their sense of self. Lev's model highlights how individuals accept their gender variance and move from denial and self-loathing to self-respect and gender congruence in a nonlinear way.

*Awareness* discusses transgender individuals' experience of distress surrounding their gender identity (Lev, 2004). Next, *Seeking Information/Reaching Out* highlights the process in which following this distress, gender variant people look for education and support about possessing a transgender identity. *Disclosure to Significant Others* occurs as transgender people begin to tell their spouses, partners, family members, and friends about their gender identity. Then, these individuals begin to explore their identity through labeling themselves as transgender (*Exploration: Identity and Self-Labeling*). They continue to examine their identity through exploring options of transition regarding their identity, presentation, and body (*Exploration: Transition Issues/Possible Body Modification*). Lastly, *Integration: Acceptance and Post-Transition Issues* discusses the process in which individuals integrate and synthesize their transgender identity post transition.

Bockting and Coleman (2007) also proposed a developmental model of transgender coming-out based on Erikson's concepts of social development. It highlights the influence of social interaction and interpersonal relationships on identity development. Thus, each stage is accompanied by potential social/interpersonal influence, risks, and results as well as developmental tasks. The stages include Pre-Coming Out, Coming Out, Exploration, Intimacy, and Identity Integration.

*Pre-Coming Out* discusses the experience of cross/transgender feelings and the social stigma that accompanies or is absent in the presence of gender nonconformity. Those who are not met with stigma proceed to the next stage earlier in life, while those met with stigma tend to hide their transgender identity to avoid rejection and discrimination. *Coming Out* highlights the stage in which a transgender individual acknowledges themselves as transgender at the risk of being abandoned and isolated due to their possession of a stigmatized identity. In this stage, a

person attempts to resolve their confusion and achievement of self-acceptance that is made difficult by a strict social environment, poor quality of interpersonal relationships, or mental disorders. The *Exploration* stage involves a person learning everything they can about transgender identity and ends potential experiences of isolation through engagement with the trans community and other trans people. This stage includes exploration of gender roles and expression. Due to the view of gender as a binary and a lack of tolerance of ambiguity, individuals in this phase may feel pressure to shed all aspects of their birth sex and adopt strict, stereotyped gender roles that are reflective of their gender identity.

*Intimacy* is concerned with the development of intimate relationships and relevant influences. For transgender individuals, those with anxious attachments and those who are male to female (MTF) seem to have harder times with intimate relationships. Similarly, societal constraints, a lack of family support, and a lack of a consolidated identity impact the development of romantic relationships for transgender people. In the Intimacy stage, sexuality is often used to affirm trans identity which can lead to risky sexual behaviors and sex work. Lastly, *Identity Integration* occurs when a transgender person integrates their public and private identities into an incorporated and positive self-concept. The identity of transgender becomes one of several important identities instead of the most important identity, which allows for a deeper level of self-acceptance.

While sexual orientation and gender identity are different entities, bisexual identity formation is important to consider when looking into the development of nonbinary gender identities. Bisexuality is often assumed to be a “transitory state” (Ulrich, 2008). This notion implies that when individuals identify as bisexual, it is a temporary identity before coming out as being gay (Ulrich, 2008). Nonbinary gender identity may also be assumed to be a transitory state

or a temporary identity before someone comes out as transgender. On another note, the process of identifying oneself as having opposite sex attractions, then as having same-sex attraction, and integrating those experiences into an identity formation as bisexual may be similar to identifying with your sex assigned at birth, identifying with the perceived opposite sex, and then integrating that into an identity formation as nonbinary. The stages of developing an identity that occupies a space between heterosexual and homosexual may be similar to the stages of developing an identity that occupies a space between male and female.

According to Fox (2003), bisexual identity formation contains four steps: first opposite sex attractions/behaviors/relationships, first same-sex attractions/behaviors/relationships, first self-identification as bisexual, and self-disclosure as bisexual. In this model, an individual identifies opposite sex attractions. They then also identify same-sex attractions, which leads them to identify as bisexual. After this self-identification occurs, a person will begin to disclose their bisexual orientation to others. This model specifically covers the unique development and discovery of bisexual identity, unlike other sexual orientation models that focus on gay and lesbian identity formation. These stages are important to consider when examining another presumed transitory state of nonbinary identity as well as the experience of occupying a space between genders.

Identity development models for LGBT individuals highlight the unique process individuals go through when discovering and identifying their sexual orientation and gender identity. In these models, confusion and anxiety seem prevalent at the beginning of the processes and, hopefully, end with acceptance, pride, and integration of their LGBT identity. These are important themes to consider when attempting to explore nonbinary gender identity development. While identity development models exist for other sexuality and gender variant

identities, a model that explores the unique process nonbinary individuals go through is crucial to conceptualizing and understanding this identity.

### **Critics of Stage Models of Identity Development**

Stage models of identity development help to understand how nonnormative identities emerge and challenge the dominant narratives around identity. Despite this, these stage models can further a tendency toward black and white, this or that thinking. LGBT studies often contain competing paradigms such as nature versus nurture, biology versus environment, and essentialism versus social construction. Nature, biology, and essentialism support diverse sexual and gender identities as valid and rooted in biological causes and allow for linear stages of development models (Eliason & Shope, 2007). In contrast, nurture, environment, and social constructionism support diverse sexual and gender identities as valid and rooted in time and place, social circumstances, and historical period, and endorse these identities as flexible, variable, and mutable. (Eliason & Shope, 2007). While there are benefits to both competing paradigms, theories that take into account the biologic, psychological, historical, and sociocultural factors of identity development are beneficial to the field.

Linear models of identity development have been critiqued due to the lack of universality and linearity of sexual and gender identity development. Sexual and gender identities are products of culture and are therefore not universal. Similarly, there is variety among sexual and gender identities within the same cultural context (Eliason & Shope, 2007). On another note, while stage models outline a linear development, queer theorists have asserted that identity development is in fact nonlinear and unstable. With identity formation being reliant on time, place, and circumstance, identities are typically tentative, fragmented, and attempt to create some order out of the chaos (Fuss, 2013). Therefore, linear, stage models do not accurately capture the

chaotic nature of identity development. They can also create further limiting, categorical conditions of identity. It is encouraged for future research on identity development to create theories that are broad, inclusive, and interactionist (Eliason & Shope, 2007).

### **Summary**

With gender so wrapped up in a faulty binary system that results in a performance where individuals feel pressure to remain normative and on-script, it sparks the question: What would a gender identity that is off-script look like? How would that identity shape how humans are viewed in the world? From a feminist framework, the presence of nonbinary gender identity may have developed due to the social construction of binary gender and society's inclination to "do gender." Through a cross-cultural review, it is clear that nonbinary gender identity is present in many cultures and is prevalent in Western society. Based on the review of gender variance around the world, the emergence of this gender identity may serve a utility that can be perceived positively or negatively on a societal level.

The integration of gender variant individuals in research will uncover new experiences that cannot be highlighted when cisgender experiences are of focus. Many development models exist that outline certain stages individuals go through when developing an LGBT identity. These models can help to frame the process of nonbinary gender identity development and may share themes in other types of LGBT identity development such as confusion, anxiety, exploration, acceptance, pride, and integration.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design and Method**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research is to identify themes in nonbinary gender identity development. Nonbinary identity falls underneath the umbrella term of transgender identity and thus research about and findings on nonbinary identity are often lumped into research and findings on the transgender community. Being a broad term, transgender and subsequent transgender identity development do not capture the specific nuances in identity development that occurs for someone who identifies as nonbinary. Feminist frameworks deconstruct gender and highlight it as a performance. Through this lens, those who possess a nonbinary gender identity that disregards the binary system will have a unique identity development when compared to binary transgender identity development. This chapter will discuss the research methods for the study, including research approach, participants, data, data collection, data analysis, limitations, and reliability and validity, along with rationales for each of the study procedures.

### **Narrative Approach**

For this study, I used Creswell's narrative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016). As discussed, nonbinary gender identity is gaining attention in the West and is often associated with transgender identity. Research is currently lacking in exploring what nonbinary gender identity is and the ways in which it is distinct from other gender identities. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify the chronological account of how an individual becomes aware of their nonbinary gender identity through a narrative approach. This approach gathered participants' stories in a way that highlighted the unfolding events and epiphanies that led them to identify as

nonbinary. This provided an account of individuals' experiences of their nonbinary identity and themes of how that unique identity develops.

### **Participants**

I recruited participants through outreach (in the form of flyers and online postings) in LGBT community centers, in LGBT affirming neighborhoods, and through personal social media accounts. The inclusion criteria stated that potential participants must be 18 years or older and have identified as nonbinary publicly for at least a year. These criteria were included to reduce risk of emotional activation during the discussion of their gender identity development and experiences. I believed that someone who was out publicly in their identity for at least one year would be more comfortable talking about their gender identity without becoming emotionally distressed. For the purpose of this study, nonbinary defined as a gender identity that does not fall exclusively in man/male or woman/female categories. This excludes those who are female-to-male (FTM) or male-to-female (MTF) transgender individuals as well as individuals who are intersex. Because the study was interested in exclusively exploring nonbinary gender identities, those with binary gender identities were not included. Similarly, those with intersex conditions were excluded due to my desire to explore themes in development of a gender identity outside of male and female categories, not those with biological conditions where their sex characteristics fall between male and female categories.

The target sample was between three to seven participants. A total of three participants were recruited. Prospective participants were asked to contact me for a brief phone screening to determine appropriateness of participation and to set up a date and time to complete the data collection interview. During the phone screen, I explained informed consent to the participants, stated that participation was completely voluntary, and explained that they could end

participation at any time without consequence. Also, the risks and benefits of participation were discussed with the participants. All participants who were recruited were determined to be a good fit for the study based on inclusion and exclusion criteria.

### **Data**

For the purpose of this study, the data I collected were the participants' narratives surrounding the emergence of their nonbinary gender identity. I gathered the data in a way that prompted for and elicited the events, actions, turning points, and epiphanies of the participants around their nonbinary gender identity. It was also elicited in a way that enabled the participants to discuss their development in a chronological manner. Along with this, I collected contextual data surrounding these narratives. This included the individuals' historical context along with their job, home, race, ethnicity, time, place, experience of culture, and experience of society. This data were collected through a semistructured interview guide (See Appendix C; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000).

### **Data Collection**

Once prospective participants inquired about the study, completed the brief phone screening, and were deemed appropriate participants for the study, I collected the data through the following protocol. I communicated with the participants over the phone and/or email to set a date and time for the interview to take place. I then scheduled a private room on their university campus to conduct the interview. All interviews occurred in a private room on my university campus.

Once the participant and I met, I began establishing rapport by introducing myself and the purpose of the study. This was followed by obtaining verbal informed consent to participate in the study as well as verbal informed consent to record. This consent included the purpose of

the research, the procedures involved in the research, alternatives to participation, foreseeable risks, benefits of the research to society, length of interview, person to contact, that participation is voluntary, and rights to confidentiality (Rose et al., 2009). After this discussion, I began to collect the data for the study through a semistructured interview guide (See Appendix C). I gathered in depth qualitative data about the chronological events of the participants' nonbinary gender identity development. I prompted the participants to provide an account of their life surrounding their nonbinary gender identity formation as well as the context of these experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

### **Data Analysis**

After data were collected in the form of audio-recorded interviews, I transcribed the interviews verbatim. The recordings and transcriptions were stored on password-protected devices. Following transcription, I analyzed the data in a way that enabled the findings to be retold in a chronological story with identified thematic elements. Themes in nonbinary gender identity development were operationalized as developmental processes that emerged and were essential to participants' understanding and identification of their nonbinary gender identity. These themes can be considered developmental milestones in nonbinary gender identity formation. If these developmental processes were present across participants' narratives, it was identified as a theme. With the guidance of stage models of transgender identity development, I used my judgment to organize identified themes into a chronological order.

I analyzed the data in regard to the character, setting, problems, actions, and resolutions in the participants' narratives around their nonbinary gender identity development. This included cultural factors. I analyzed the participants' social interactions; the continuity of their past, present, and future; and the physical places where the stories about their nonbinary gender

identity took place. I also evaluated the participants' orientation to time, place, characters, and situation; the complicating actions or sequence of events, crises, and turning points; their evaluation of their learning and emotions; and their resolutions. I analyzed the processes the participants have undergone as well as the unique features of the participants' lives (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Once I analyzed the data, one participant engaged in member checking the data. This participant met with me, read through the analysis and synthesis of the data, and provided feedback to me. The participant stated that they felt the themes in nonbinary gender identity development, as discussed, captured their narrative of their gender identity development.

### **Limitations**

This study's methodology has numerous limitations. Gender identity is only a small component of a person's identity and individuals possess many other differing social identities such as race, religion, and sexual orientation. As a narrative study, the research contained three participants. This limited sample did not capture the diversity of individuals and the relevant aspects of intersectionality in regard to nonbinary gender identity.

On another note, the topic of nonbinary gender identity is underrepresented in the literature. Nonbinary identity is often aggregated with transgender gender identity and, as a result, becomes invisible in the research. Due to this, my study is not based off of a plethora of prior literature surrounding nonbinary gender identity, and in order to conduct this study, I needed to rely on personal knowledge of gender variance that was not necessarily present in academic literature. More research on nonbinary identity needs to be conducted and culminated together to lead to more thorough research studies.

Lastly, the nature of my participant screening and selection may have created limitations for the study. In order to be selected for the study, participants had to identify as nonbinary, be 18 and older, and have lived publicly in their identity for at least a year. Similarly, they had to have come into contact with the recruitment documents through access to specific neighborhoods in a large Midwestern city and social media. They also had to be able to correspond with me through phone and email. This participation pool does not account for individuals who are in the questioning phase of their gender identity formation and/or potentially do not have access to social media, specific neighborhoods in a large Midwestern city, and/or phone and email. Therefore, the data I collected from the participants in the study were potentially influenced by these outside factors.

### **Validity and Reliability**

While conducting this study, it was important to implement strategies that ensured the study was valid and reliable. To ensure validity and reliability, I applied member checking, triangulation, thick description, and peer reviews. Member checking consists of consulting with study participants so they can confirm the credibility of the narrative accounts presented in the study findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I contacted each of the three participants in my study to member check the study's findings. One of the three participants engaged in member checking, and they indicated that they felt their narrative of their nonbinary gender identity was captured in the study's results. Triangulation occurs when the researcher uses numerous sources of information to form themes in their study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). My study contained three participants from whom I collected information in order to create themes in the study. Thick description is when the researcher provides as much detail as possible to describe the study's setting, participants, and themes (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Throughout the study, I

provided rich details about the setting (See Research Design and Method), the participants (See Findings), and the themes (See Findings) in the project. Lastly, peer reviews occur when others, aside from the principle investigator, who are familiar with the research or phenomenon of focus, review the data and research process (Creswell & Miller, 2000). To implement peer reviews, I consulted with my dissertation committee, consisting of my dissertation chair and dissertation reader, throughout my research process.

When conducting qualitative research through a narrative approach, researchers must bracket their own experiences to the extent possible (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Bracketing ensures that I am coming from an objective standpoint in regard to the research questions, data collection, and findings. I identify as a White, heterosexual, cisgender female. I am 26 years old and am a graduate student pursuing my Psy.D. in clinical psychology. Although I hold normative identities surrounding my sexual orientation and gender identity, I feel I have gone through developmental processes in which these identities were explored and established. Similarly, in identifying as a woman, I have experienced the oppressive nature of the gender binary. Through my experience of identity development coupled with my experience of the binary system, I believe I have constructed a unique meaning of what it means to be a heterosexual cisgender female, and I tend to go “off script” of traditional gender roles and norms. Despite not identifying as nonbinary, aspects of identities that challenge the socialization of gender and subsequent gender scripts resonate with me. I am also a young, White, college-educated individual. According to the literature, these aspects of my identity have been associated with nonbinary gender identity in a problematic way. Nonbinary gender identity has been perceived to be a young, White, academic term where elements of power and privilege are relevant.

### **Summary**

The study explored themes in nonbinary gender identity development through a narrative approach. This approach enabled me to gather participants' stories in a way that highlighted the unfolding events and epiphanies that led participants to identify as nonbinary. Three participants were recruited and deemed appropriate for the study due to meeting the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Data were collected through a semistructured interview, and themes were analyzed by taking into consideration participants' social interactions; the complicating actions or sequence of events, crises, and turning points; their evaluation of their learning and emotions; their resolutions; and the unique features of the participants' lives. Limitations of the methodology include a small sample size that was unable to capture the nuances of differing intersecting identities on gender identity formation, the study being based off of minimal research on the population of study, and the limitations of the recruitment and screening procedures. I attempted to increase validity and reliability through bracketing my own identities and experiences and implementing member checking, triangulation, thick description, and peer reviews. Based on the topic I explored, the study will offer valuable insight into the experiences and narrative of nonbinary individuals. It will also enable themes in nonbinary identity development to emerge.

### **Chapter 4: Findings**

The purpose of this study was to find themes in nonbinary gender identity development. Gender variance is present worldwide and yet, in Western society, the dominant narrative of gender continues to operate on a binary system. Despite the prevalence of the gender binary, the identification and awareness of nonbinary gender identities are on the rise in the United States. Examining themes in nonbinary gender identity development is essential in understanding the nuances of gender identity and bringing visibility to these identities.

Three people who identified as nonbinary were interviewed for this study. Under the umbrella term of nonbinary, participants also identified their gender identity as transmasculine, genderqueer, and gender fluid. The semistructured interviews lasted from 90-180 min and utilized a questionnaire based on a narrative inquiry interview guide (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). The questions addressed participants' identities, moments of tension and revelations they had related to their identities, how their gender identity impacts them and those around them, cultural values or things of great importance when navigating their gender identity, their experience with gender socialization, and gender expression. The questions attempted to gather a narrative of how nonbinary gender identity developed for these individuals and other impactful experiences related to their gender identity.

The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 25 years of age at the time of the interview. All had at least a high school education and had partially or fully completed higher level education. One participant had medical interventions (hormone replacement therapy [HRT] and top surgery) to affirm their gender identity, and one participant had considered HRT as a means to affirm their identity. Participants used a range of gender pronouns, including he/him, they/them, or a combination of he/him or she/her depending on whether their gender attribution, or others'

perception of their gender, was male/masculine or female/feminine. Participants also possessed a range of sexual orientations, including queer, bisexual, and attracted to women/femme identified individuals. All participants had been out and in their gender identity for at least one year.

Pseudonyms have been assigned for the purpose of this report.

### **Participant Jesse<sup>1</sup>**

Participant Jesse is in his early 20s, identifies as nonbinary and transmasculine, and uses he/him or they/them pronouns. For the purpose of this project, he/him pronouns will be used when referring to this participant. Jesse was assigned female at birth (AFAB), underwent gender affirming top surgery, and utilizes HRT. He is in the process of obtaining his bachelor's degree in philosophy and works as a barista. He identifies his sexual orientation as queer and his race and ethnicity as White. His relationship status is single, and he does not have any children. He indicated he grew up in an Eastern state and now lives in a large Midwestern city.

### **Participant Taylor<sup>2</sup>**

Participant Taylor is in their mid-20s, identifies as nonbinary, and uses they/them pronouns. Taylor was assigned male at birth (AMAB) and has considered using HRT. They completed their bachelor's degree in math and physics and work as an actor and researcher. They identify their sexual orientation as queer and bisexual and their race and ethnicity as White. Their relationship status is single, and they do not have any children. They reported they grew up in a rural Midwestern state and now reside in a large Midwestern city.

<sup>1</sup>Pseudonym used to ensure confidentiality.

<sup>2</sup>Pseudonym used to ensure confidentiality.

### **Participant Adrian<sup>3</sup>**

Participant Adrian is in their mid-20s, identifies their gender identity as nonbinary and genderfluid, and uses “whatever” pronouns, more specifically he/him or she/her when being perceived as more masculine or more feminine. For the purpose of this study, they/them pronouns will be used when referring to this participant. Adrian was assigned male at birth (AMAB). Adrian completed their bachelor’s degree in math and physics and are currently pursuing a graduate degree in communication science disorders. They identify their sexual orientation as attracted to women, their race as White, and their ethnicity as Jewish. Their relationships status is partnered, and they do not have any children. This participant also identifies as an experienced meditator and a Bodhisattva. They attributed their concept of their gender identity to their involvement in meditation. They reported Bodhisattva means “enlightened mind” and “anyone who has realized enough to help bring relation to others...the idea that [they are] here to reduce the suffering of all sentient beings.” Similarly, this participant indicated that how they see themselves in the world is “based on what I am doing,” which lends to numerous identity classification, including researcher, programmer, data scientist, hypothesis creator, man, woman, and androgynous. Adrian indicated they grew up in an Eastern state and now live in a large Midwestern city.

### **Themes Across Participants**

When examining the interviews of the three participants, 11 themes were identified for nonbinary gender identity development and four themes were identified as other considerations (See Appendix A). Themes in nonbinary gender identity development were operationalized, or defined, as developmental processes that emerged and were essential to participants’

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym used to ensure confidentiality.

understanding and identification of their nonbinary gender identity. These themes can be considered developmental milestones in nonbinary gender identity formation. Themes for other considerations were concepts such as roles, influences, and concerns that were related to participants' nonbinary gender identity, but not necessarily essential to their gender identity development process. Of the themes identified, 11 were major themes while four were minor themes (See Appendix A). Major themes were defined as topics that were present in all three participants' narratives, and minor themes were defined as themes present in at least two participants' interviews.

Because this study is a narrative inquiry with an aim of constructing a chronological account of nonbinary gender identity development, themes in nonbinary gender identity development will be discussed in a linear, chronological order. This linear, chronological ordering is through my lens and interpretation of the data, informed by other stage models of identity development. It is not a direct report of the participants' experiences of these themes in a chronological order. In assessing the data, participants' experiences of these themes were both nonlinear on an individual level and when compared to one another. In analyzing individual interviews, participants often experienced these themes at all different stages in their lives, multiple times. Similarly, the themes across participants could not be organized into a cohesive, linear, order. Following the discussion of themes in nonbinary gender identity development, themes for other considerations will be discussed. Each theme will be noted whether they were major or minor.

The themes in nonbinary gender identity development in linear order are as follows: 1. Acknowledging Self as Different from Peers (Minor); 2. Discomfort and Confusion Surrounding Gender Identity and Sex Assigned at Birth (Major); 3. Recognizing Bodily Manifestation of

Gender Identity (Major); 4. Identifying with “Opposite” Binary Gender (Major); 5. Mirroring People with Queer Identities: Friends/Internet/Media (Minor); 6. Conforming to Binary Gender (Major); 7. Rejection of Binary Gender Norms and Scripts (Major); 8. Identifying Gender as a Performance (Major); 9. Exploring with Different Gender Labels and Identifiers (Major); 10. Embracing Masculinity and Femininity (Major); and 11. Feeling Authenticity in Flexibility and Fluidity (Minor; See Appendix A). Themes for other considerations in no particular order are: 1. Influence of Systems, Society, and Culture (Major); 2. Gender Dysphoria and Mental Health (Major); 3. Fear or Hesitance Around Gender Expression (Major); and 4. Mediator Among Those With Varying Gender Identities (Minor; See Appendix A).

As themes emerged, at times, they overlapped due to the multidimensional nature of gender identity and its containment of many different aspects, such as sex assigned at birth, gender expression, gender norms, and gender scripts. For example, two themes that surfaced were: Theme 3 (Major): Recognizing Bodily Manifestation of Gender Identity and Theme 4 (Major) Identifying with “Opposite” Binary Gender. While these are separate themes, overlap occurs when a participant’s identification with the “opposite” binary gender occurs related to their body and secondary sex characteristics. Thus, discussion of certain themes includes some overlap of other themes, depending on a participant’s experiences.

### **Theme 1 (Major): Acknowledging Self as Different from Peers**

In two participant interviews, there was frank discussion of feeling “different” at a young age. The acknowledgement of this difference was general but was also related to gender identity. The notion of being different from peers seemed to clue participants in to their nonnormative gender identity status but also assisted in the comfort and normalcy of the identifying as “other” or “different” in term of their nonbinary gender identity. Participant Taylor stated, “Especially as

a younger kid, I always thought of myself as weird...it was never difficult for me to have that idea of myself as 'other' in one way or another." Participant Adrian reported, "I was very different from other people in my hometown."

For another participant, this difference felt exclusively related to his gender identity in the process of coming out. When thinking about coming out as a transman, Participant Jesse remembers thinking how this would affect his status with his peers through the statement, "I remember thinking about it and what it would mean to come out as trans...people might not accept me...am I going to have to change schools because I've been going to the same school since I was 3?"

For participants, being different from peers seemed to be significant part of their nonbinary gender identity development experience. This difference appears to have assisted participants in identifying their nonnormative gender identity. It also seems to have provided comfort in adopting a gender identity that was different from the majority. Lastly, for one participant, identifying as trans made him different from his peers and there was concern about acceptance from peers because of his trans identity.

## **Theme 2 (Major): Discomfort and Confusion Surrounding Gender Identity and Sex Assigned at Birth**

All participants discussed discomfort with their gender and sex assigned at birth. Participant Jesse was assigned female at birth (AFAB) while Participant Taylor and Participant Adrian were assigned male at birth (AMAB). Their sex assigned as birth will be noted next to their pseudonym for clarity when it is relevant to the interview excerpts that follow. Statements

<sup>4</sup> Periods, such as ..., indicate that the researcher condensed parts of the interview narrative, without making changes to participants' word choices.

from participants implied long-term discomfort with their gender identity and sex assigned at birth or gendered expectations.

I think for as long as I could remember, I always felt a really deep seated sense of discomfort and when I saw [drag kings/transmasculine people in media]<sup>5</sup> I think I finally realized what that discomfort was... It was this isn't really who I am...and I need to do something to change it. (Participant Jesse [AFAB])

He also reported, "I had dated two boys in late middle school, early high school and I always felt so uncomfortable, but I just kind of thought that was normal." Participant Taylor (AMAB) reported, "For me, it's like, I've never felt terribly at home in masculinity," while Participant Adrian (AMAB) stated, "This idea that I am a man, I never questioned it, I never displayed particularly strong displays of masculinity, I was always a little bit aversive to it."

For Participant Jesse (AFAB), this discomfort manifested in relation to secondary sex characteristics.

[Before top surgery] I wore a binder every day for much longer than you're supposed to and it was getting progressively worse and worse... I would not leave the house if I wasn't wearing [a binder], I didn't even like to be around my family when I wasn't wearing it. (Participant Jesse [AFAB])

This discomfort also manifested socially for two participants. They discussed times when being identified as their gender/identity sex assigned at birth by others was uncomfortable for them. Also, seeing strong gendered presentations in others caused personal discomfort with participants' gender identity and sex assigned at birth. Participant Taylor (AMAB) stated, "I saw other models of masculinity happening around me, farther away than my peers in middle school,

<sup>5</sup> Brackets, such as [ ], in interview narratives are used to indicate that the researcher condensed parts of the interview excerpt and replaced pronouns and word tenses for clarity and flow.

but nonetheless [I thought] this is something that I don't want or understand." They also indicated:

...A lot of times [my ex-partner would] say something [like] "you are a man so you do this thing," [which was] really bad for me...like don't say that the fact that I'm doing something wrong is an indication of maleness, essentially...there were like ways in which I was regarded with suspicion that felt very gendered that eventually became very painful for me. (Participant Taylor [AMAB])

When I was young, [distressing, gendered experiences with] my brother, this very type A, very masculine guy, probably influenced my idea of what it was to be a man. So I kind of had a strong aversion to being a man for a while. To masculinity and all these things.

There was some aversion there. (Participant Adrian [AMAB])

Participant Adrian (AMAB) also discussed their self-talk around this gendered confusion:

For a long time, [confusion around my gender identity] would just repeatedly come up, every 6 months or so and the initial question was what is wrong with me? Why do I feel this way? Not even necessarily getting into the feeling but just asking myself what is going on here? A ton of confusion. (Participant Adrian [AMAB])

For each participant, this discomfort and confusion around gender identity and sex assigned at birth manifested in a variety of ways. From all of the interviews, it seems this discomfort can be pinpointed as beginning at a young age, specifically childhood or early adolescence. For Participant Jesse, this discomfort seemed to start generally and then he attributed it to his sex assigned at birth after seeing gender variant presentations. This participant also experienced discomfort because of secondary sex characteristics. Participant Taylor and

Participant Adrian discussed explicit discomfort with maleness and the social influence of others on this discomfort.

### **Theme 3 (Major): Recognizing Bodily Manifestation of Gender Identity**

All three participants referenced their body when talking about their gender identity.

Theme 3 (Major): Recognizing Bodily Manifestation of Gender Identity discusses ways in which participants referenced their bodies, generally. The body will also be discussed in Theme 4 (Major): Identifying with “Opposite” Binary Gender and Other Consideration 2 (Minor): Gender Dysphoria and Mental Health, but those themes will specifically discuss how participants identified with the “opposite” binary gender’s body or their experiences of their body related to gender dysphoria. Participant Jesse discussed his decision to go on HRT:

When I decided to start testosterone...I never wanted to have children so I wasn't worried about that, and everything else is so abstract and everyone's body is different that the immediate changes that are positive completely outweigh any possible negatives...I think the physical changes I really really wanted were I wanted my voice to be lower, testosterone alters your muscle growth and it changes the facial structure, I had a pretty round, soft face I guess and I didn't like that and I wanted facial hair and I wanted to be able to grow muscle easier so pretty much everything. (Participant Jesse)

For participant Taylor, their body seemed to be a prevalent point of disharmony, related and unrelated to their gender identity. This will be discussed more fully in Theme 4 and Other Considerations 2 They stated, “I spend a lot of time anxiously and frustratingly thinking about how I look and how I'll be read,” and “I don't know that I have ever gone an entire day where I've thought I feel good about how my body is shaped and functions, which is really sad...”

Lastly, Participant Adrian, discussed how their gender manifests in their body. At one point in their development, they felt as though masculinity and femininity came from different parts of their body.

I started feeling like my masculinity came from my head and my femininity came from my waist. That was the initial kind of thing, and that there were distinct parts of me that felt like oh this one's masculine and this one's feminine and they did not like each other.

(Participant Adrian)

My forehead, that upper part of my head region, feeling masculinity and a masculine voice from there, and from my base, a more feminine energy...they can kind of both be present, when that was first happening it would switch back and forth, but right now I kind of feel these two, one feminine I described this earlier, as a lightness in the arms but what it feels like now is a lightness in the breath and I can hear it, it turns my voice...into a little more of a singing voice. And if I'm talking like the male voice, it's a bit more incisive, a pointed kind of attention. That comes from my forehead region. I can hear it in my voice, things are sharper. (Participant Adrian)

#### **Theme 4 (Major): Identifying with “Opposite” Binary Gender**

All participants discussed identifying with the “opposite” binary gender. While gender is a spectrum, and the term opposite implies there are only two genders (not one, but the other), current Western views of gender are extremely binary. For the purpose of the discussion of this theme, opposite will be used not to imply that gender is binary, but to highlight the experiences of the participants as they found themselves aligning with what they were socialized to believe was the “opposite” gender of the gender they were assigned at birth. Similar to the previous theme, this identification with the “opposite” binary gender manifested in participants' bodies.

For Participant Jesse (AFAB), this was concerned with physical appearance and secondary sex characteristics. He stated, “I just wanted my chest to be flat at all costs,” and “I remember first wearing [a binder] and looking in the mirror and being like, ‘Oh that’s what I want to look like.’” He also reported, “[After top surgery], I thought I would be feeling so euphoric every day, but it felt more natural, like I had had a flat chest for my entire life,” and “I definitely think physically, I do prefer to have a more physical masculine appearance to my actual body.”

For Participant Taylor (AMAB), this manifestation in the body was more related to reproductive functioning. They said, “[During my 4th year in college], I’d been really thinking a lot about the idea of being pregnant, that’d be kind of cool.” Another way this identification with the “opposite” binary gender came to be was through “opposite” gender expressions.

[When I was in an acting academy], I wanted to do this piece and I wanted to really femme up for it...I did a burlesque act...which was awesome and so fun...and I got to feel super hot...cool and powerful...[and I thought] a more femme identity is a better fit for me and feels powerful and fun for a reason. (Participant Taylor [AMAB])

...At one point, we went to a concert, it was raining, drizzly, so we were wearing long clothes, long ponchos, and to me it was like a dress, so I was playing with it like you would a dress or skirt, having fun, pretending, like [down low] in public being able to feel like a woman...so it was very fun for me. (Participant Adrian [AMAB])

For two participants who were assigned male at birth, this theme emerged as identifying their experiences with what they had come to understand as women’s experiences.

My third year of college...I was hooking up with someone for the first time, and it was a very confusing experience for me...the difficulty I’d had in communicating my own sets of boundaries and feeling how hard it was to have any concept of what I wanted out of

the sexual experience... I felt like it fell more into what I had come to understand as women's experience in hook up culture. Especially straight ones. And I was like this is weird because I'm a man hooking up with a woman. (Participant Taylor [AMAB])

I took a feminist philosophy class in college...and I would talk to women about it and when I heard [feminist concepts], it completely resonated and made complete sense to me...so I would talk to women about that and being like yeah of course, of course...and men could conceptually get it but it clearly was not resonating with their experience.... I started noticing that what resonated with me resonated with people who I perceived to be women and it didn't seem to resonate with men (Participant Adrian [AMAB])

In this period in college when I started, I call it questioning, I was asking a lot of questions of myself...I started becoming interested in women's experiences. So it kind of started there then with my own experience. I thought something was wrong with me but I also had this real interest in women's experience because this feminist philosophy was resonating with me and resonating with women. (Participant Adrian [AMAB])

This identification, similar to Theme 2, was also present in social relationships. For one participant, this manifested in their comfort with emotional intimacy and emotional labor. As a person AMAB experiencing this, it can be categorized as identifying with the "opposite" binary gender due to emotional intimacy and labor being a societally understood "female" or "feminine" attribute.

I feel like a lot of the ways that I orient myself around my gender identity within social relationships...if you think emotional labor discourse, I have for a very long time, quite comfortably, fallen into the role of the person who listen and solves. (Participant Taylor [AMAB])

...More so in college, I began to see my...comfort with emotional intimacy, and how often I ended up being the person people came to with problems, or whatever, that sort of stuff made me consider that I wasn't just an anomalous participant in a masculine identity, I maybe had a different one. (Participant Taylor [AMAB])

For another participant, this identification came from women in their life. Participant Adrian (AMAB) stated, "Women in my life in general, in my family specifically, have been strong women, and all the women I've dated have been strong women...strong women have always been present in my life and in my genetics."

For two participants, social relationships were also relevant in uncovering identification with the "opposite" binary gender. For one, this looked like their being upset over identifying with the "opposite" gender and then being rejected by a partner for doing so. For another, this looked like their being upset for outright being told by a partner that they were not the "opposite" binary gender.

I laid my head on [my ex-partner from high school's] shoulder and they got mad at me and were like you're acting like a fucking girl, sort of thing. I was so upset and so hurt... I had been seen in a way I didn't know I could be and then rejected. I didn't have language to identify any of this, so because I didn't have the language or any concept of existing outside of binary genders, the idea of being seen as someone not living within those two categories, or in the wrong one, I think hit me with a large dose of fear because it's like I have been spotted as an aberration and then rejected. (Participant Taylor [AMAB])

I have this vivid memory of [my girlfriend] looking me in the eyes and being like but you're not a woman, you're not a woman. Oh man did I get pissed, over the next couple

of days I was really really mad...hearing that, I was sure it was wrong. Because in that moment, I did feel like a woman. (Participant Adrian [AMAB])

Identifying with the “opposite” binary gender came up for all participants in some way or another. This theme reflects the complexities of gender, which encompasses expression, reproductive functioning, gendered experiences, gendered norms, and gendered scripts. Participants identified with the “opposite” binary gender in relation to their body (appearance and function), expression, social narratives, and social relationships.

### **Theme 5 (Minor): Mirroring People with Queer Identities: Friends/Internet/Media**

Two participants discussed how exposure to and identification with people with queer identities helped to formulate and understand their nonbinary gender identity. This mirroring occurred through queer friends, queer people on the Internet, and queer people in the media. Participant Jesse (AFAB) talked about the influence of the Internet and media in his multiple experiences with coming out. He stated, “I had just been going on the Internet more and so I was seeing a lot more of people with different sexualities and I realized that I was not attracted to men.” Other quotes from Participant Jesse (AFAB) are as follows:

A few months before [I came out as a transman], I came out as lesbian and that didn't quite feel right but I didn't know any trans people. I was never exposed to it, especially not transmasculine identities, in the media it's always transfeminine identities. So I must have seen it online, like a transmasculine person, and I was like that's a thing too.

(Participant Jesse)

A lot of it was, the only assigned female at birth people who I saw in the media were butch lesbians and not transmasculine people, so I just thought like oh if I feel more masculine then I guess this is what I am. And then I was seeing YouTube videos on drag

kings and that kind of sparked my curiosity a little more because it didn't occur to me that people could be transmasculine. (Participant Jesse)

In the movie *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, the main character is transfeminine but there's a supporting character who's transmasculine but also kind of a drag king but I remember seeing that and that character dressed exactly how I dressed at that time so that played into [my identity formation]. (Participant Jesse)

Similarly, Participant Taylor discussed how the Internet contributed to their trans identity as well as their sentiments of how it is beneficial for other trans folks.

A lot of people don't have [a trans queer crowd] and a lot of people find it on the Internet. A lot of people, even me, surrounded by my brilliant experts that I love and trust, learn a lot of things by reading arguments people are having [online] and occasionally chiming in. (Participant Taylor)

Both participants discussed how queer friends have contributed to their identity formation. Participant Jesse stated, "Also being in a city, it's so much more diverse...like all my friends are queer and trans which I also never had." He indicated:

When I first decided that I wanted to start testosterone, it was still my sophomore year and I went to this trans youth conference workshop thing in [an Eastern city] and I had only met like one trans person before then. So that was the first time I was surrounded by trans people and they were talking about testosterone and top surgery and I guess even at that point I didn't realize that that was something I could do because I just had no idea. (Participant Jesse)

A lot of my friends, if not a majority, actually are nonbinary and I had never really met a nonbinary person, maybe once or twice in high school, the only trans people I knew were very binary trans people. (Participant Jesse)

[Surrounding myself with like-minded people] is really amazing. And it's another thing that is this huge change but now just feels so natural...it's such a weird thought to me that I used to not be surrounded by all these queer and trans people. (Participant Jesse)

Participant Taylor indicated, "I was surrounded by people who gave me a lot of room to explore things and who had done a lot of that work themselves and I had a lot of help and a lot of guides," and "Seeing queer people be themselves is a magical and empowering process and that was really honestly a lot of [my gender identity formation]." They also reported, "...This was one of those times where it was really great having a friend group of queer experts," and "Since in some ways trans people are relatively rare, I was so so lucky to fall into a trans queer crowd that I could learn from and be loved by and get to know in a really truthful way."

The presence of other queer people in these participants' personal lives as well as on the Internet and in the media was integral in their gender identity formation. For Participant Jesse, characters in the media and gender nonconforming folks online played a large role in the beginning stages of his identity development, specifically his transmasculine identity. It seems that later, the influence of nonbinary friends contributed to his nonbinary identity formation. For Participant Taylor, queer friends were their guides and experts when exploring their gender identity. Being and identifying with queer folks played heavily into their nonbinary identity formation. They also commented on the relevance of the Internet on their gender experience as well as the gender experience of other trans people.

**Theme 6 (Major): Conforming to Binary Gender**

Every participant discussed conforming to binary gender, whether in behavior or thought. The word conforming is used intentionally to highlight that this was done as a way to comply with and obey rigid gender norms. This conformity manifested differently for each participant based on their life experiences and occurred at multiple stages of their development. Participant Jesse (AFAB) talked about the prevalence of this conformity at multiple stages of his life. First, it seems he conformed behaviorally to sex assigned at birth. He reported, "...But in middle school I was definitely more feminine, never super feminine but I consciously felt the need to be feminine going through puberty and stuff, middle school.

Then, after coming out as a transman, this conformity occurred again, behaviorally, this time with masculinity. He indicated, "When I came out as a transman, I felt the need to completely cut off any sort of feminine aspects of my life. I got rid of all my clothes, got all new clothes, wore really baggy clothes for a while," and "I felt like if people were going to accept me as trans, that I had to be as masculine as possible." He also stated, "I think I also tried to be masculine when I was by myself because it was so tied up in my new identity that I felt like I couldn't digress from that," and "[In high school], the only trans people I knew were very binary trans people.... it was very interesting to see what sort of trans identities I was exposed to and that's what I felt like I should copy." Another quote stated:

Most of masculinity that I had seen and tried to emulate was toxic. I felt like I could not have any sort of feminine aspects of my personality or my appearance and I feel like a lot of men in the world feel that way too... Yeah, looking back, none of it was conscious, but it was very much like I didn't want to be emotional, and actually when I first came out [as a transman] in 10th grade, I had been a vegetarian since fifth grade, and I started

eating meat again because I thought that was the more masculine thing to do.

I...completely changed all the things in my room, I was always really into music and art and theater and I kind of stopped doing that as much cause I thought that wasn't the masculine thing to do. (Participant Jesse)

Similar to Participant Jesse, Participant Adrian (AMAB) also discussed conforming to their sex assigned at birth. They discussed this through speaking about a poem they wrote:

I had another poem about the relationship between them, the little boy in me is sad to be the one to cage her in, kind of thing, the idea that the male aspect would cage in the female aspect, cage her in, prevent any kind of expression. (Participant Adrian)

The poem is entitled "As He Continues To Pretend." The little boy in me who once wore a happy grin, is sad to be the one who has to cage her in. The little girl in me asks him, "Why can't we be friends?" The little boy just shakes his head, wipes his teary eyes and says "I'm sorry." As he continues to pretend. (Participant Adrian)

Participant Taylor (AMAB) talked about how conformity looks for them when behaviorally leaning into different aspects of their gender. They highlighted how people tend to categorize certain behaviors and characteristics in a binary way, more feminine versus more masculine. They reported, "I think there is a certain frankness that people expect from masculinity that certainly doesn't always exist within it, that can be very productive, sometimes harmful." They also stated:

I think in some ways, I got more shit standing up for myself when I lean more into femme parts of my identity, because some unfortunate cocktail of internalized sexism or I don't know, other stuff. It makes me feel like I had less of a right to take up space and like therefore it was less important that I know how to. (Participant Adrian)

I don't believe that either in general or in my own life that accessing feelings of empowerment and stuff means accessing more masculine parts of my identity and accessing more nurturing and care taking things mean accessing femme, performing femme things, because that's not true. (Participant Adrian)

Participant Adrian discussed how, as they were trying to discover their gender identity, they conformed to binary ways of thinking about gender. They stated, "It's so deeply engrained, this idea of masculine versus feminine." They also said:

For a number of times it was like, "Oh, I have to be trans," I kept falling into this idea, because it was the only thing I even knew of I guess, it was like, "Oh, if you feel like a woman ever and you're a man, you must be in the wrong body, you must be a woman all the time," and I would get into that for a while and it would just seem, for me, a little drastic. (Participant Adrian [AMAB])

All participants discussed times when they comply with binary ways of being and thinking, related to their gender. As evidenced by this theme, in Western society, thinking about gender as a binary is so pervasive and results in a lot of binary gender conformity. Participants either conformed to expectations of their sex assigned at birth, went along with other binary ways of being when exploring "other" gender identities, or thought about themselves and carried themselves in a way that aligned with the gender binary system. The participants, like all people, felt an inclination to conform to binary gender based on societal influence. This theme seems essential to nonbinary gender identity development because, despite this inclination, this engagement in binary ways of being and thinking did not seem to work for the participants and is the impetus for the next theme that is discussed.

**Theme 7 (Major): Rejection of Binary Gender Norms and Scripts**

While all participants discussed experiences of conforming to binary gender, they also all talked about rejecting binary gender. Similar to Theme 6, this rejection occurred both behaviorally and in thought. Although in each participant's narrative, the rejection of binary gender did not happen in a finite way, it was essential to all participants in establishing their identity as nonbinary. Participant Jesse (AFAB) discussed this rejection as he moved from identifying as a transman to identifying as nonbinary. He stated, "I realized I'm not a particularly masculine person and that's okay and people aren't going to think that I'm not valid," and "[Now], I'm really conscious about trying to be in touch with my emotions and making sure I'm not suppressing anything and especially since testosterone makes it harder to be in touch with your emotions." He also reported, "It's been really nice to share clothes with my friends and not really have to think about what I'm putting on, I just put on whatever I want to wear." He stated:

[Now], I'm very conscious of whenever I'm doing something that is a gendered thing, I want to be very conscious that I'm not just doing the masculine thing because I feel like I have to or because I feel that's the default, whenever I do things I want to feel like that's genuinely who I am. (Participant Jesse)

Looking back, I realized that mentally, [as a transman], I was playing into toxic masculinity things, not wanting to be emotional, it was definitely like I felt pushed to the other side but because I had never seen someone come out as trans, I just thought that's just what you do when you come out as trans. (Participant Jesse)

The therapist I was seeing once a month had this support group for some of his clients, high school age, transmasculine people...I remember back then we all kind of dressed the same and looked the same and when I was home [recently]...I actually went to say hi to

everyone and I could tell that I looked so different than everybody else and I would never have dressed the way I was dressed before or held myself in that way. (Participant Jesse)

At this point, all of the clothes that I have are either from the women's section of thrift stores or trans clothing swaps or like rummage sales...I don't really buy clothes that often and I always go to thrift stores but I just go to the women's section, cause I wear women's shirts, I still wear men's pants because women's pants don't fit me right.

(Participant Jesse)

Participant Taylor talked about rejecting binary gender norms and scripts growing up, related to the intersection of their sex assigned at birth and sexual preferences.

In middle and high school I felt like I was attracted to women, or people who I thought were women, and many of my friends who are straight men also were but I didn't feel like I understood the dynamics that I saw around me, or there was a particular script, many different and conflicting particular scripts for courtship, sex, just being friends, whatever, between men and women that I found very alienating and confusing, I was like what? That seems dumb, what are we doing? (Participant Taylor [AMAB])

...Coercion and manipulation and like shitty stuff around consent was just super normal and I was like I don't get why this is necessary, I don't get why this is here, I don't want any of this.... I interpreted it as, as a man, this is the sexuality that is available to me.

(Participant Taylor [AMAB])

When I started seeing sexuality happen around me and participating in it myself, I started seeing it as a cultural and identity shaping force for my own life, I noticed a lot of ways in which it didn't fit with me, that eventually pointed me to towards things that I hadn't considered as misfits with masculinity but eventually came to look like those. And what I

mean by that is I noticed that a lot of sexual romantic scripts didn't super fit to me and didn't feel like they made a lot of sense. (Participant Taylor [AMAB])

They also discussed a time during adolescence where gender norms and scripts were pushed onto them in a way that did not feel comfortable.

The youth minister found out that my parents were split up, he was like, "Oh, so you're the man of the house now?" and I was like, "No?...what does that mean?...what emotional responsibilities are you putting on a 15 year old right now?...why would you assume that that's a necessary presence?"...is something that I remember thinking about a lot of the time, like this doesn't make sense to me and I don't get it, I've seen it enough to get that it's a cultural script that is around and there are rationalizations that I can invent or see for it but I'm like this just doesn't fit and doesn't jive with me. (Participant Taylor [AMAB])

Lastly, Participant Adrian talked about rejecting binary gender in their conceptualization of their gender identity.

I definitely have an idea of what a woman is, like I grew up in American society and I have been exposed to a lot of images and heard a lot of things so I have an idea of what a woman is, that comes from my conditioning as to what a woman is, not a-priori, it's conditioned into me, at least that's my view on it, but then there's also my experience of being a woman which definitely those do not align, and that was kind of a point of contention early on I guess was like why do I feel this way? I don't look a certain way, and so the feeling of being, the thought that something is wrong with me. (Participant Adrian [AMAB])

For each participant, rejecting binary gender played a different part in their gender formulation. For Participant Jesse, it solidified their nonbinary gender identity after a long history of conforming to binary gender. This rejection is a common practice for him as he continues to engage with his gender identity. For Participant Taylor, it clued them into the fact that their gender identity may not be male due to the fact that the maleness they saw playing out before them did not “jive” with them. For Participant Adrian, it was essential in conceptualizing their identity in the face of binary gender conditioning.

### **Theme 8 (Major): Identifying Gender as a Performance**

All participants discussed gender as a performance in some way or another. They not only discussed gender as a performance in general, but ways in which they performed their gender. Participant Jesse, who is AFAB, described his experiences performing femininity at young ages:

I remember as a really young kid, for as long as I can remember, watching movies and TV and literally copying what the women were doing, in the way that they talked and the way that they acted and how they dressed. In one of my classes this year I read Judith Butler for the first time and it was on “gender performance” and that’s exactly what I was doing. (Participant Jesse)

As a kid, when I wasn’t around other people, I didn’t act very feminine. It didn’t occur to me when I was a kid but looking back, I realize that I only acted very feminine when I was around other people. (Participant Jesse)

The three participants describe how queer identity can be performative as well. After coming out as a transman, Participant Jesse discussed copying the masculine trans identity that

he was exposed to. He said, "...It was very interesting to see what sort of trans identities I was exposed to and that's what I felt like I should copy."

For Participant Taylor, their gender performance is related to queer expression, while for Participant Adrian, it is related to how they embody their gender identity and how others should attribute their gender. Taylor reported, "I have some outfits that feel performatively queer in a way that makes me feel good." Adrian indicated:

I can switch myself back and forth, from male to female, and female to male, it kind of comes with this performative aspect of it like now I don't really feel like either, I feel like I'm talking about my experience, but if I wanted to be male...the idea is I would have much stronger claims, I'd be making stronger statements, but I don't think that's actually that accurate, it's just kind of more the feeling it a more solid kind of base, it's in my chest, yeah, it's like my spine is more erect and solid is the word I would use... I can hear the difference in my voice and the way I'm speaking. If I switch to being a woman, then it's kind of more, in my limbs, things are a little lighter, softer, I'm exaggerating it a little bit now, but it's this kind of a little more fluidity and lightness to the feeling. (Participant Adrian)

I prefer people to tell me what they perceive me to be in the moment. Because I feel I'm genderfluid, if someone perceives me to be a man, they should be referring to me as he. If in a moment they feel like I was performing like a man, the pronoun would be he, and vice versa, if I'm acting or they perceive me to be a woman, the pronoun should be she. (Participant Adrian)

All participants acknowledged the performative element of gender. Participants seemed to perform their gender in childhood and adolescence in congruence with their sex assigned at

birth, over the course of their gender identity development, and/or now in their queer, nonbinary identity. The acknowledgement that gender is a performance existed in conforming to the gender binary as well as in the rejection of it. While gender is a performance for all people, for gender nonconforming folks, it seems the performance becomes “off script” or against the norm of the gender performance that is expected based on sex assigned at birth.

### **Theme 9 (Major): Exploring with Different Gender Labels and Identifiers**

Gender identity development is a complex process that can require some trial and error. While gender identity is separate from sexual orientation, one participant included their sexual orientation in their process of developing their gender identity. Due to this, sexual orientation will be discussed here. All participants discussed the process of exploring different gender labels, identifiers, and pronouns when developing their gender identity.

I came out as lesbian and that didn't quite feel right...I didn't know any trans people, I was never exposed to it, especially not transmasculine identities...so I came out as a transman when I was 16 and I'm 20 now... when I came to college I sort of realized I can be not cisgender but I don't have to be the other side of the binary which had never occurred to me. (Participant Jesse [AFAB])

So initially [after the acting academy performance], I started asking people to use *he* and *they* for me, a year later, I said my pronouns are *they* and everyone was like oh cool and for the most part they were very good with it which was a cool experience for me.

(Participant Taylor [AMAB])

Some quotes from Participant Adrian included, “In this period in college when I started, I call it questioning,” and “At that point I was still kind of identifying as genderqueer or

something, no term really ever fit me. I wasn't transgender, genderqueer at that point kind of started resonating." They also stated:

At that point, [I] was kind of thinking I guess I'm genderqueer or something, I wasn't really sure what was going on, not that I am now. I knew that I wasn't trans, I didn't feel like I was always a woman...so genderqueer or something like that. (Participant Adrian [AMAB])

In the process of developing their gender identity, participants went through a dynamic process where they explored different gender labels and identifiers. This seems to have occurred once the participants picked up on differences in their identity from dominant narratives around sexuality and gender. It also seems to be a trial and error process where the participants explored identifiers and labels that felt "right" for them.

### **Theme 10 (Major): Embracing Masculinity and Femininity**

After wrestling with conforming to binary gender and rejecting binary gender, all participants seem to have come to a point at which they embrace both the masculine and feminine parts of themselves. This harmony of masculinity and femininity are crucial to participants' determination that they occupy the space between binary gender classifications. While across the aforementioned themes, Participant Taylor often discussed how masculinity makes them uncomfortable, how they have a tendency to reject masculinity, and how they are more comfortable and accepting of the feminine parts of themselves. They also stated what they like about masculinity. They stated, "There are definitely ways in which I relate to masculinity positively, some of which I feel like I have to reject, and working with that, but it's surprisingly hard to tell you what they are." They also said:

In the process of telling people that I'm trans and nonbinary and not cis, I often very much feel that I have to emphasize the parts where I've rejected masculinity to convince them that I'm not full of shit. But there are some things that I like a lot about masculinity.

(Participant Taylor [AMAB])

I think there are some cool ways in which masculinity and humor and emotional availability intersect.... I like [ways of communicating] that is something that for me I learned from masculinity or through interacting with it, and to me, feels like interacting with people through a masculine lens. (Participant Taylor (AMAB))

Participant Adrian explains how in embracing their more feminine parts, they feel more able to embrace both the masculine and feminine parts of themselves.

...Interestingly to me at least, was as I started embracing my femininity more, within the past few months, as I started getting into it I started seeing more masculine displays in myself, it was like it was suppressing something and when I started exploring it, both came out. (Participant Adrian [AMAB])

I'm tenuous to even talk in this way, the masculine side versus the feminine side because it's not, they're not actually separate, and I have had very rare moments of them coexisting, at this point I'm kind of one or the other, it slides back and forth, but I've had moments where it like, if you can picture a black and white fractal, where at every level the background is white and the foreground is black, or vice versa, at every level there's the most intricate intertwining of two things that go at infinitum inward, so there's no actual separation, if you keep going in there always intertwined, that's the image that comes to mind when I'm experiencing this actual coexistence which feels more like a dance where both sides are present and dancing with each other and there's this beautiful

balance that's struck that I think I've experienced twice, for seconds... It's a wonderful feeling, it's blissed out. (Participant Adrian [AMAB])

I think that the people who get closest to me are the people who appreciate the kind of tender side, the softer side, but I'm more and more appreciating that I couldn't be as close to men as I am without my male side. (Participant Adrian [AMAB])

They also made statements like, "...She is better at listening, and the male aspect is better at logic," and "That was a revelation, it was like there's actually a coexistence of them both in me. So it didn't have to be one or the other. At any given time, both could be in me, so to speak."

As mentioned in excerpts earlier in this section, Participant Jesse embraces a more masculine appearance and physicality while acknowledging that he is not a very masculine person in thought, personality, or style. He stated, "I definitely think, physically, I do prefer to have a more physical masculine appearance to my actual body," and "I realized I'm not a particularly masculine person and that's okay and like people aren't going to think that I'm not valid." He also made numerous statements such as:

I'm very conscious of whenever I'm doing something that is a gendered thing, I want to be very conscious that I'm not just doing the masculine thing because I feel like I have to or because I feel that's the default, like whenever I do things I want to feel like that's genuinely who I am. (Participant Jesse [AFAB])

At this point, all of the clothes that I have are either from the women's section of thrift stores or trans clothing swaps or like rummage sales I guess but yeah I don't really buy clothes that often and I always go to thrift stores but I just go to the women's section, cause I wear women's shirts, I still wear men's pants because women's pants don't fit me right. (Participant Jesse [AFAB])

**Theme 11 (Minor): Feeling Authenticity in Flexibility and Fluidity**

Two participants explicitly talked about the notion that flexible and fluid ways of being work better for them in general as well as in relation to their gender identity. They highlighted how rigidity has been limiting to them and their existence. At times, this authenticity in fluidity has contributed to their gender identity development. On the other hand, at times identifying as nonbinary resulted in participants feeling more free and authentic.

Participant Adrian discussed their approach to conflict and gender identity formation as it relates to flexibility and fluidity.

I think that gets to how I think about conflict, so the conflict is I have two things, it's either this or it's that, and the revelation is "Oh wait, never mind." The revelation is that they weren't conflicting, when you think in terms of black and white, the first step is realizing it's a spectrum, and I think a lot of our thinking ends up somehow becoming black and white, I would assume because of some kind of conditioning, because things aren't black and white so where does it come from? So I think for me the idea that things are...either this or that and getting past that requires seeing that reality is not this or that, it is as it is, and I think an enlightened mind is seeing things as are they are and going from black and white to spectrum is a first step to seeing things as they are. (Participant Adrian)

[Buddhist influences inform] my perspective of not taking any of this stuff too seriously. Whatever I say about what I'm experiencing is not my experience, it has no real resemblance to reality. So that is helpful because at any given point if I start thinking this is how it is, I immediately know I'm wrong because there's no way that if I can think it and bring it up to the level of a conceptualization, that it has any bearing on what's

actually happening in the infinite complexity of reality. So that informs my view on gender. (Participant Adrian)

Two participants highlighted the notion that sex and gender are complex and how rigid classifications do not adequately capture the nuances of gender.

...You have many different things that determine what we call gender, and each of those things has a spectrum of possibilities they can manifest in, even just in terms of phenotype, and there are different categories we can place different combinations of these things into that exist beyond this idea of the masculine and the feminine, that we can elaborate upon and what it might mean to be those things or leave more room for elaboration. (Participant Taylor)

...Gender is a concept, and to say man and woman, there is a collapsing of experiences into a concept, which is much more simple than any kind of direct experience of something so what I mean when I say sometimes I feel like a man and sometimes I feel like a woman, I will stand by it, so to speak, but it is under continuous examination by me what do I actually mean when I say those kinds of things in terms of feelings and what is actually occurring. (Participant Adrian)

I don't really necessarily identify with researcher as much as I identify with male and female, I don't necessarily see, in a fundamental sense, there being an actual identity, I see it as an amalgamation of things that are working together that approximately seem to be working coherently and so then actions go into that, thoughts go into that, feelings go into that, and then you get an approximate identity. (Participant Adrian)

Participant Taylor discussed why flexibility and fluidity, related to their gender identity, works better for them.

It's like I could continue to exist in this world as a man if I needed to, I could do that, probably even as a straight one... it's just upon realizing there are other ways of doing things, it's like these are better, these work better for me. (Participant Taylor [AMAB])

It's not that there's no overlap, I just have a better model. One of my old roommates from college...he really likes to say, all models are wrong and some are useful, which I very much agree with, and is very useful to me for thinking about gender. (Participant Taylor [AMAB])

Participant Taylor also stated, "I think a different set of descriptors [queer/nonbinary] work better for me than the ones that I've been using for a while [cisgender heterosexual male]" and "They/them [pronouns] specifically, I like it because it's vague, which is the same reason I like identifying as nonbinary and color myself queer, flexibility, fluidity, it's true, these are things I crave."

Both participants also discussed how identifying on the spectrum of gender has freed them up in other aspects of their life. Participant Taylor stated, "Starting to think of myself as nonbinary has actually freed me up a lot...how I think about who I'm attracted to," while Participant Adrian indicated, "At one point it was like, there's this part of my body vs. this part of my body and they were in conflict, but now it's a little more fluid."

These participants acknowledged the importance of thinking about gender in a flexible way as opposed to the rigid ways in which the Western world typically conceptualizes gender. They debunked the notion that gender is rigid and unchanging and identified how gender manifests flexibly and fluidly within them. This has led them to identify their gender identity in a way that captures the nuances of their experience. Nonbinary gender identity is a more accurate and authentic identity for the participants.

The purpose of this study was to identify themes in nonbinary gender identity development through a narrative inquiry that rendered chronological stages of development. Although the themes between and across participants were nonlinear, the themes discussed above were themes that emerged that, through my lens, could be ordered chronologically to resemble a stage model of development. Along with the 15 themes discussed above, other themes emerged that are important considerations in nonbinary gender identity development. These themes cover topics such as influences, gender dysphoria and mental health, fear and hesitation around gender expression, and mediating people of varying gender identities. While these themes did not fit into a chronological model of development, they are important considerations when discussing nonbinary gender identity development. These themes will be discussed thoroughly in the Clinical Implications section of this paper.

#### **Other Consideration 1 (Major): Influence of Systems, Society, and Culture**

Each participant discussed how the influences of the culture they are or were immersed in played a part in their gender identity formation. Early on, certain systems seemed to hinder participants' identification of their nonbinary gender identity. Two participants specifically talked about how the culture of their hometown influenced their gender identity formation. Participant Jesse indicated, "[When pursuing HRT], I was still 16 so I needed [my father's] signature on the form." He also reported:

Definitely being very far away from my family...[helped solidify my gender identity], I have to figure everything out by myself...and being surrounded by people who are just meeting me for the first time...I can like discover who I am without people having preconceived notions about what I should be. (Participant Jesse)

When I was in that high school situation, I felt like if people were going to accept me as trans that I had to be as masculine as possible. I always kind of realized that really wasn't what I wanted to do but I had never really had the opportunity to examine that until I got to college where no-one knew me and I could reinvent myself, and that was a year ago.

(Participant Jesse)

Similarly, Participant Taylor stated:

[Growing up in a rural Midwestern state]...the intersection of sex and organized religion...it was a pretty conservative milieu...where I was and what I was doing was not a safe space to be queer which I dealt with by not at all acknowledging or thinking about the possibility of being queer. Pretty effective. (Participant Taylor)

Two participants also talked about how the current Western culture, its dominant narratives around gender identity, and people's tendency to hyper focus on the gender binary and gendered presentations contribute to the way they experience their gender identity. Participant Jesse stated, "For so many years [my gender identity] was such a huge thing and it was all people ever really talked to me about and now I feel like I can step back from that and be a person." He also indicated:

The dress code at my school was pretty strict and for all of the years except my senior year, they had a different dress code for boys and girls and so when I came out [as a transman] I was like I have to go to the boys' dress code now. (Participant Jesse [AFAB])

I think for so many years, so much of my identity was wrapped up in being a transman and it was coming from myself but also coming from every single person around me, it was such a huge deal at the school because they didn't know what to do and [now] I

[don't] have to think about that and I [can] settle into who I actually am for the first time.

(Participant Jesse [AFAB])

I definitely noticed that for things like job interviews or fancier events, I definitely feel more pushed to be more masculine and if I wore more feminine clothes to a job

interview, maybe I wouldn't get the job because of that. (Participant Jesse [AFAB])

Participant Adrian had a similar take. In reference to a more feminine expression, they stated, "At this point, I want it to feel like it's not a thing, but at this point it still feels like quite a thing." They also indicated:

This might be a little self-aggrandizing, but I'm a bit of a pioneer in this, maybe not a pioneer but I'm still in a society where [nonbinary gender identity] is considered atypical, in a similar way that being gay seemed 30 years ago. (Participant Adrian)

### **Other Consideration 2 (Major): Gender Dysphoria and Mental Health Concerns**

Each participant discussed mental health concerns at some point in the interview. Two participants specifically discussed experiences with gender dysphoria, a mental health condition discussed in the *DSM-5* (APA, 2013) as "a marked difference between the individual's expressed/experienced gender and the gender others would assign them" (p. 452). Because gender dysphoria is currently considered a mental health condition, it will be discussed here. All participants discussed the evolution of their mental health concerns and discussed them as changing dependent on and nondependent on their gender identity formation. For Participant Jesse, his depression seemed correlated to his gender dysphoria, and as his physicality changed and his gender dysphoria lessened, so did his depression. Despite that, as his depression subsided, he acknowledged that more anxious features emerged.

I was just really really depressed for a long time. Almost all of [my depression], is tied to my dysphoria, I would say.... Yeah, I would say it's definitely [correlated], it's been interesting...having gone through all of these physical changes that I wanted so badly and needed so badly for so many years, it's interesting to see what my mental health is like now. I still have a lot of anxiety which wasn't as prevalent before when I was just like really really depressed so the anxiety isn't related to gender dysphoria it's just like something that I have. So that kind of became more prevalent as the depression went away. (Participant Jesse)

Participant Taylor discussed mental health concerns from a young age that seemed related and unrelated to gender identity. This manifested as suicidal ideation, disordered eating, and depression. He stated, "...9, 10, 11 years old, there were times when feeling lonely or whatever, suicidal ideation was my go to." This participant acknowledged that their depression and disordered eating may be related to their gender identity, but also admitted that this is a difficult distinction to make.

The anorexia was the first explicit thing that was identifiable. \*describes restrictive eating and excessive exercising behaviors\*<sup>6</sup>...I was like everything is normal and fine.... I described this to a friend of mine and he was like, "I think you're anorexic." And I was like, "Fuck you, I'm not." And then like a year later I was like hey I think you might have been onto something. (Participant Taylor)

Depression...I do think it is related [to gender identity]... I will say that a lot of my depressive thoughts and things that feel like impossible tasks or whatever are at the moment related to gender expression, like the idea of shopping for clothes feels utterly

<sup>6</sup> Asterisks, such as \*...\*, identify when the researcher describes the content the participant is talking about as opposed to including the excerpt itself.

impossible, it's exhausting having to navigate when and how to manage pronouns with people, there are at the very least, a lot of different things that drain effort and focus that I would rather put elsewhere but don't feel like I can and that tugs on my depression in deeply inconvenient ways. (Participant Taylor)

For Participant Adrian, mental health concerns were present throughout their life. Due to this, when gendered confusion came up, they had bigger issues to prioritize such as their depression and addiction. They described how, once their mental health concerns subsided, there was then room to explore their gender identity.

The issue here is the gender stuff did not come to awareness or consciousness, until I was 20, 21 [years old] and I had been depressed since I was probably, at the latest 12, 13 probably earlier than that. That very traumatic year was ninth grade, so I was 14, I was definitely depressed. So it was really when...the depression was starting to ease, and I was starting to address the addiction problems that I even became aware of the fact that I had anything to do with gender. (Participant Adrian)

It may have been the case that this idea that "room" was made [for gender exploration] by getting into whether it's the rising of the meditative awareness or the loss of the depression. Yeah I think in some sense, for me, all of those things had to be happening. Because if the depression hadn't eased, I probably would have killed myself so that would have stopped my exploration of gender. I was still pretty addicted to pot when this was happening, that didn't really end until probably a year or two later. (Participant Adrian)

Two participants discussed their experiences with gender dysphoria. Participant Jesse reported, "I think the physical changes were what most of my dysphoria were centered around."

He also stated, "...Gender dysphoria, I was just really really depressed for a long time. Almost all of [my depression], is tied to my dysphoria, I would say.... Yeah I would say it's definitely [correlated]." Participant Taylor expressed a similar experience.

But in retrospect, I spent a lot of time thinking about whether [my disordered eating] was dysphoria or dysmorphia. I'm sure the answer is both, but it's super common for trans kids to have disordered eating when they're young and I have never really ever felt like my body is right. (Participant Taylor)

### **Other Consideration 3 (Major): Fear or Hesitance Around Gender Expression**

Each participant discussed fear or hesitance around expressing their gender. At times, this fear and hesitance seems to stem from the notion that appearing gender nonconforming is physically dangerous. Participant Jesse (AFAB) stated, "...Walking through the streets of a city and being someone who looks like a feminine man, feeling a little more in danger than I ever have." Similarly, Participant Taylor (AMAB) reported, "Ideally, I would prefer [exploring gender expression to] be a playful process for me, I like playful things. Unfortunately, there are possibilities and connotations for violence and so playfulness is somewhat muted by that."

Other times, this fear or hesitance came from how their gender expression will be reacted to by others or how they will be perceived.

...I wore this dress last Tuesday and I felt terrible and I was like come on! I was super anxious like somebody was going to yell at me, I'm getting weird looks, this doesn't feel right, I'm a freak, all of it... this was in the middle of the day and I was going to a class, and it was so much more uncomfortable than it has been before and I wasn't sure why and this \*points to clothes they are wearing\* is what I usually default to wear, like gym

shorts, t-shirts...and I'm like, man, this feels super masc [*sic*], but at least my body is pretty comfortable and I can sort of pretend it's gender neutral. (Participant Taylor)

If I'm going to be going out and [expressing publicly]...there's going to be some level of discomfort in people around me...that's pretty uncomfortable for me, it'd be nice to just have a space where I felt comfortable just expressing myself and exploring ways to express myself. (Participant Adrian)

I want to look good but again it not be a thing, just be like that person looks good and not be like that dude's rocking that dress, kind of thing, it's like I only want to wear a dress in front of people who will perceive that through the lens of I'm looking at a woman. So I don't want to wear it in public because it's not going to be that way. (Participant Adrian)

...When I started wearing a skirt, very occasionally, to a dance party where it was not a thing kind of thing, and that's kind of been what stops me from expressing my gender...it's something that feels more or less natural for me to do when I find an outfit that I like, but going out in public in it, the fear is that it's going to be seen as a very unnatural thing. (Participant Adrian)

Two participants also discussed what stops them from expressing their gender more.

I have been described by my friends before as pathologically busy...I tend not to give myself time to do the things I want to do...this also relates to gender expression, I have not made a lot of room to explore these things...I've always hated buying clothes, I've always hated shopping, I've always hated getting haircuts, I haven't gotten one in 2 years, which feels excellent. I will say that a lot of my depressive thoughts and things that feel like impossible tasks or whatever are at the moment related to gender expression, like the idea of shopping for clothes feels utterly impossible. (Participant Taylor)

It's like one desire to be nonchalant [about expression] runs into how important it is to me. So it can't be nonchalant when every second of the day, it's so meaningful to me and it's very tender and it can easily retreat and just be coded in fear and hard to get to again. So I've just got to be patient and gentle. (Participant Adrian)

#### **Other Consideration 4 (Minor): Mediator Among Those With Varying Gender Identities**

Two participants talked about feeling like their gender identity contributes to them being mediators between people with varying gender identities.

...There were times when I would play mediator between my male friends and their female partners sometimes, like you seem to be bad at this and I think I can help. And there were times when I thought of myself as explicitly like the bridge between men and women. (Participant Taylor)

It allows me to be a communicator of sorts often times in conversation... I think especially when men and women are both present. Being able to listen to the women but also speak to the men, has been very useful. I also listen to the men and speak to the women but those are different things, there are different qualities to each of those four things, take a different approach and being able to relate with each person's experience I think helps me communicate with them and I think that communicator quality translates outside of just gender. To science and things like that. (Participant Adrian)

#### **Summary**

In analyzing the data through a narrative approach, themes in nonbinary gender identity development emerged and were discussed as developmental processes that were relevant and essential to participants' understanding and identification of their nonbinary gender identity. Because this study was a narrative inquiry with an aim of constructing a chronological account

of nonbinary gender identity development, the themes in nonbinary gender identity development were discussed in a chronological order. This chronological ordering was conducted through my lens and interpretation of the data, and was not a direct report of the participants' experiences of these themes in a chronological order. Themes for other considerations also emerged and included concepts such as roles, influences, and concerns that were related to participants' nonbinary gender identity, but not necessary essential to their gender identity development process.

Due to the complex and multidimensional nature of gender, the way in which these themes emerged for each participant was extremely nuanced. Participants experienced these themes at all different stages in their lives, multiple times, in many different ways. Because gender identity encompasses many different aspects, such as gender expression, sex assigned at birth, gender norms, and gender scripts, there was also overlap in the way themes emerged and were experienced.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

This study used a semistructured interview with the purpose of uncovering themes in nonbinary gender identity development through a feminist lens. While this interview guide served as a prompt for participants' experiences with their nonbinary gender identity development, it did not yield linear, chronological results from the subjects. This is to be expected as gender is a multidimensional and complex concept with many relevant factors. While themes emerged among participants' gender identity development experiences, each participant's narrative proved to be unique such that the resulting themes were messy and overlapping. The process of attempting to simplify, categorize, and organize thematic elements of participants' experiences placed a rigidity on top of something fluid. This rigidity made it difficult to adequately capture the nuances of the nature and context of gender identity development.

In line with the aims of a narrative inquiry, for the results to yield a chronological, ordered, stage-esque model, I needed to apply my perception and judgment onto the data. I used other stage models as a guide to organize the themes that emerged from participants' experiences. Some themes that emerged were able to fit into a stage-esque model that could be ordered in terms of participants' experiences, while others fell outside of this neat categorization, resulting in an "Other Considerations" section of the results. This enabled the themes that emerged from the data to be heard regardless of the agenda of the narrative inquiry. While discrete themes did emerge in nonbinary gender identity development, so did overlap in themes.

### **Western Socialization of Binary Gender**

The Westernized socialization of binary gender was prevalent in the study results. From a feminist framework, our understanding of gender is deconstructed and discussed as a social

construct. This social construction of gender starts from a young age and follows individuals throughout their development. Similarly, the expectation that individuals follow a traditional gender model and fulfill gendered norms and roles results in a propensity for people to not only have a gender but to “do gender.” Themes in the data emerged related to experiences with gender norms, scripts, and expectations; identifying gender as a performance; and the influence of society.

Due to the Westernized socialization of the binary gender, participants encountered rigid gender norms, scripts, and expectations from young ages. After being assigned a sex at birth, the participants encountered norms, scripts, and expectations related to that sex. For many of the participants, the identification of these norms, scripts, and expectations and the subsequent rejection of them was integral to their nonbinary gender identity formation. This included being feminine or masculine, assigning certain characteristics to men versus women, having specific associations related to males and females, and having gendered norms and expectations placed on them by others because of their sex assigned at birth.

Each participant discussed their experiences of rigid gender norms, scripts, and expectations and their subsequent experience of the traditional gender model at the beginning of their development. Participants who were assigned male at birth were assumed to identify their gender as male, possess masculine gender roles, and have romantic relationships with women. On the other hand, the participant who was assigned female at birth was assumed to identify their gender as female, possess feminine gender roles, and have romantic relationships with men. As expected, early on, participants identified their gender as in line with their sex assigned at birth. As discussed above, they also adopted gender roles related to their sex assigned at birth.

Similarly, early in their development, they dated the “opposite sex” and also conformed to heterosexual expectations.

Each participant identified gender as a “performance.” Throughout development, participants highlighted ways in which they were “doing gender.” The acknowledgement of participants performing gender is connected to the rigid gender norms, scripts, and expectations that come with binary gender. Participants discussed performing gender as a means of conforming to what was expected of their sex assigned at birth. Furthermore, participants discussed that doing gender also extended into their gender variant identities. When Participant Jesse came out as a transman, he moved from performing his sex assigned at birth (female) to performing male gender. Similarly, Participant Taylor and Adrian described a performative element to their queer gender identity as well.

While each participant originally engaged in a more traditional gender model and performed their sex assigned at birth, throughout their development, each participant moved from a traditional gender model to a more authentic gender model and seemed to curtail the more performative elements of their gender. Later in their development, the participants explored gender and sexuality labels unrelated to their sex assigned at birth and heteronormativity. They also rejected gender roles tied to their sex assigned at birth and became more comfortable incorporating a variety of gendered roles into their lives and behaviors. Jesse (AFAB) realized that he was not attracted to the “opposite” sex and was attracted to more feminine people. Similarly, Taylor moved from identifying as a heterosexual cisgender male to identifying as nonbinary and queer.

The Western assumption of a traditional gender model and the subsequent experiences described by the participants highlight the conflation of gender identity and sexual orientation.

For Jesse and “Taylor,” the evolution of their gender identity and sexual orientation as they moved away from a traditional gender model and into a more authentic gender model is clear. Jesse went from identifying as a female who dated males, to a transman who dated cisgender women, to a nonbinary person who dates other queer folks. Similarly, Taylor went from identifying as a cisgender, heterosexual male to a nonbinary person who identifies their sexuality as bisexual and queer. As participants moved away from the gender binary and the rigid norms and scripts around gender expression and sexual orientation that come with it, their gender identity and sexual orientation seemed to evolve into something more authentic and fluid.

### **Transgender and Nonbinary Identity Labels**

Transgender identity has been conceptualized as a full *transition* from one binary gender to another as well as an umbrella term for individuals who *transgress* and *transcend* the gender binary (Bornstein, 1998). With this conceptualization in mind, each participant is transgender due to the fact that they transgress and transcend the gender binary. Under this umbrella term, participants also self-identified as nonbinary, transmasculine, and genderfluid. While themes emerged amongst the experiences of these trans and nonbinary individuals, the notion that the term transgender encompasses an unfixed group of people with immense differences remains unchallenged by this study. While participants’ experiences could be grouped in regard to their thematic elements, the experience of each participant was unique and independent when compared to the other participants. Thus, in this study, the term nonbinary also encompasses an unfixed group of people with immense differences.

Nonbinary is a label that enables people to deny the current Western binary system of sex and gender. This held true for the members of this study upon reviewing their narratives. They were all assigned a binary sex at birth, and throughout their development, began to identify their

gender as outside binary gender. They use a variety of gender identity labels such as nonbinary, transmasculine, and genderfluid. They also use a variety of pronouns such as he/him, they/them, or she/her. Connell (2005), Monro (2007, 2010), and Engel's (2002) research of nonbinary people's expression was relevant to the participants. In line with the research, participants *stretch* feminine and masculine identity categories and make them more flexible for themselves. They also *diversify gender* through identifying the interaction of their sex characteristics, gender experiences, and expressions as on a continuum and not in rigid categories. They *negate sex difference* by embracing a more nongendered, nonbinary gender presentation, and they *create ambiguity* by expressing their gender in a way that defies their sex assignment as fixed over time.

Although nonbinary people are a specific group of transgender folks who defy binary gender, themes in identity development emerged for participants that are similar to the identity development of binary transgender people (FTM or MTF transgender people). Participants described discomfort around their sex assigned at birth and/or gender dysphoria, which is a common experience for binary trans folks (Steensma et al., 2013). Additionally, the participants experienced bodily manifestations of their nonbinary gender identity, which is also a typical occurrence for binary transgender people. Lastly, participants experienced identification with the "opposite" sex, which occurs for binary transgender individuals. Despite these similarities, the differences in themes that are useful in delineating between binary and nonbinary transgender people are binary transgender individuals' comfort in the binary as the "opposite" gender and nonbinary transgender people's tendency to embrace masculinity and femininity and find authenticity in flexible, fluid gender categorizations. Although binary and nonbinary trans people have similarities in the way they experience incongruence in their sex assigned at birth, their bodies, and their gender roles, binary trans people identify with the "opposite" sex and find

authenticity in a gender transition, while nonbinary folks find authenticity in occupying a space between male and female genders.

### **Perception of Gender Variant Identities**

Currently, the West possesses a binary view of gender that results in an overall negative perception of gender variance. Two participants explicitly discussed gender dysphoria, a mental disorder classified in the *DSM-V* (APA, 2013) as “a marked incongruence between one’s experienced/expressed gender and their assigned gender” (p. 452). While only two participants discussed this explicitly, another participant’s discussion of their experience touched on gender dysphoria implicitly. All participants discussed experiences of their gender identity being policed as well as minimal public representation and exposure to people with variant gender identities. Minority stress and social perception of gender variance also helps to explain the link between mental health concerns and gender variance that emerged in the data as well as fear around authentic gender expression. In a culture where gender variance is discussed as wrong and pathological, mental health concerns and fear of expressing gender variance is an inevitable result. Participants discussed distress and confusion around their gender identity due to the current gender binary system as well as hesitance around gender expression due to fear of judgment and violence.

Although participants discussed the rarity of trans folks as well as limited representation and exposure to transgender people throughout their development, for two participants, the media, the Internet, and exposure to queer people were integral to their nonbinary gender identity development. While minimal, the little representation present in society and the media served as tools for mirroring for participants. Mirroring occurred with queer friends but also queer people on the Internet and queer characters in the media. The prevalence of transgender people and

characters in the media, as well as gender variant representation in society, is important for gender variant identity development.

The literature also discussed nonbinary gender identity as being associated with young, White, college students. It is important to note that everyone involved in the study, including the participants and myself, were young White individuals currently immersed in higher education. The notion that nonbinary is an academic White term falls in line with the identities of the people involved in this study.

### **Stages of Gender Identity Development**

Research has indicated that there are multiple, dynamic processes individuals go through to develop their gender identity when they are not cisgender. In line with this, the data did not yield a neat chronological, stage-esque model of nonbinary gender identity development. Therefore, in order to fulfill a narrative inquiry, I needed to apply their judgment and utilize guidance from other stage models. The organization of the themes that were uncovered and discussed in the Findings section was based on the literature on stage models of gender identity and sexual orientation development. According to Eliason and Schope (2007), gender variant individuals first go through their gender identity development and then their sexual orientation development. For two participants, the development of their gender identity affected and changed the development of their sexual orientation.

Devor's (2004) model of transgender identity formulation theorizes 14 stages of gender identity development. These include *Abiding Anxiety*, *Identity Confusion*, *Identity Comparison*, *Discovery of Transgender Identity*, *Identity Confusion about Transgender Identity*, *Identity Comparison about Transgender Identity*, *Tolerance of Transgender Identity*, *Delay Before Acceptance*, *Acceptance*, *Delay before Transition*, *Transition*, *Acceptance of Post-Transition*

*Gender/Sex, Integration, and Pride*. Arlene Lev's (2004) model of transgender emergence includes *Awareness, Seeking Information/Reaching Out, Disclosure to Significant Others, Exploration: Identity and Self-Labeling, Exploration: Transition Issues/Possible Body Modification*, and *Integration: Acceptance and Post-Transition Issues*. This model is based on the concept that complicated cultural expectations create dissonance in transgender individuals and their sense of self.

Bockting and Coleman (2007) also proposed a developmental model of transgender coming-out based on Erikson's concepts of social development. It highlights the influence of social interaction and interpersonal relationships on identity development. Thus, each stage is accompanied by potential social/interpersonal influence, risks, and results as well as developmental tasks. The stages include Pre-Coming out, Coming out, Exploration, Intimacy, and Identity Integration. A model of bisexuality identity development was also relevant to this study. According to Fox (2003), bisexual identity formation contains four steps. These include *First Opposite Sex Attractions/Behaviors/Relationships, First Same-Sex Attractions/Behaviors/Relationships, First Self-Identification as Bisexual*, and *Self-Disclosure as Bisexual*.

These stage models were considered when organizing the themes that emerged in nonbinary gender identity development. See Appendix B for a comparison of stage model themes with this study's themes. To start, Lev's (2004) model discussed *Awareness* while Devor's (2004) discussed *Abiding Anxiety* in the beginning stages of the models. Similarly, Devor discussed *Identity Confusion*, especially around originally assigned gender and sex as well as identity comparisons about originally assigned gender and sex while. This led me to place themes around awareness, discomfort, and confusion at the beginning of the results discussion: 1.

Acknowledging Self as Different from Peers (Minor); 2. Discomfort and Confusion Surrounding Gender Identity & Sex Assigned at Birth (Major); 3. Recognizing Bodily Manifestation of Gender Identity (Major). In Fox's bisexuality development model, the author discussed the *First Same-Sex Attractions/Behaviors/Relationships* (Fox, 2003) while Devor, Lev, and Bockting and Coleman (2007) discussed themes of *Discovering Transsexualism/Transgenderism, Seeking Information* through witnessing and mirroring, and *Pre-Coming Out*, or identifying cross/transgender feelings, respectively. This led me to then discuss Theme 4. Identifying with "Opposite" Binary Gender (Major) and Theme 5. Mirroring People with Queer Identities: Friends/Internet/Media (Minor). Devor's model then discussed stages of *Identity Confusion about Transgender Identity* and *Identity Comparison about Transgender Identity* while Fox (2003) discussed the stage of *First Opposite-Sex Attractions/Behaviors/Relationships* and *First Same-Sex Attractions/Behaviors/Relationships*. This informed me to consider the dynamic process of conforming to binary gender and rejecting binary gender in Themes 6. Conforming to Binary Gender (Major) and 7. Rejection of Binary Gender Norms and Scripts. The next stages that I discussed were 8. Identifying Gender as a Performance (Major) and 9. Exploring with Different Gender Labels and Identifiers (Major). This was influenced by Lev's *Exploration: Identity and Self-Labeling* and Bockting and Coleman's (2007) *Exploration* stage. Similarly, theme 10. Embracing Masculinity and Femininity (Major) was influenced by Fox's *First Self-identification as Bisexual* stage and Devor's *Tolerance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity*. Lastly, Devor's (2004) *Acceptance* stage as well as Lev and Bockting and Coleman's *Integration* phases influenced my discussion of Theme 11. Feeling Authenticity in Flexibility and Fluidity (Minor). See Appendix B for a comparison chart of themes from past models that guided the organization of themes that emerged in this study.

### **Limitations**

This study has numerous limitations. As a narrative study, the research contained three participants who were all of the same racial background. Gender identity is only a small component of a person's identity; individuals possess many other differing social identities such as race, religion, and sexual orientation. The limited sample did not capture the diversity of individuals and the relevant aspects of intersectionality in regard to nonbinary gender identity. Similarly, all participants were White and were either assigned male at birth or identified as transmasculine. Due to this, the results may only capture themes of experiences of nonbinary individuals who are White and fall more on the masculine spectrum of nonbinary identity.

The nature of my participant screening and selection may have created limitations for the study. In order to be selected for the study, participants must have identified as nonbinary, be 18 and older, and have lived publicly in their identity for at least a year. This does not account for individuals who are in the questioning phase of their gender identity formation. Therefore, the participants from whom I collected data may have specific factors that influence why they are not questioning their identity.

### **Future Research**

As mentioned multiple times throughout this work, gender variance and specifically the nuances of nonbinary identities are largely underrepresented and underresearched. Future research on the distinctions between and special considerations for the spectrum of gender identities present is needed. Similarly, research on nonbinary gender identities as well as the intersections of other social identities is important. Gender identity is a small component of one's identity, and research that assesses gender identity as it relates to the variety of other social identities a single individual occupies will produce rich and highly differentiated data.

Gender and its construction is rapidly evolving, and the concept of the social construction of gender was relevant to this study. Similarly, the current pathology of gender variance and the current gender binary is rigid, limiting, and does not allow to authentic development. This manifested in the data as participants' rejection of the gender binary and its normal scripts, and expectations and living as nonbinary, as authentic. Although this identity allows for authenticity and freedom for people, being nonbinary also possessed elements of being an "other," being misunderstood, and being fearful in the face of society's and others' judgment. With these considerations in mind, research that moves towards deconstructing the gender binary instead of pathologizing gender variant individuals is crucial. The problem is not gender variance. With its current, limiting views of gender, society is the problem and gender variance is the solution.

### **Clinical Implications**

Feminist theory sets a wonderful foundation for deconstructing the West's current gender binary system and highlighting why the gender binary is seemingly no longer working for everyone in the population. Clinically, it brings to light the difference between sex and gender, the social construction of gender, and how people, regardless of gender, are more similar than different. Most importantly, it critically assesses the gender binary and the harms of social norms around gender. When working with clients, regardless of gender identity, the rigidity of the gender binary, and its potential harms, should be considered.

As discussed in this paper, the limiting nature of the gender binary and the current binary system is clear and can result in mental health concerns for gender variant people. When working with gender variant clients experiencing mental health concerns, the demands and oppressions of the gender binary system, the unique intersections of their identities, and the origin of their symptoms must be considered. Each participant described mental health concerns they felt were

related and/or unrelated to their gender nonconforming presentation in a gender binary system. At times due to minority stress, being gender nonconforming in a gender binary system in and of itself can produce mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance abuse. These mental health concerns can occur not because a person is gender nonconforming, but because they are such in a world that views gender as binary. As a result, they can experience lack of acceptance, lack of representation, microaggressions, and other forms of discrimination. On the other hand, gender nonconforming people may also experience mental health concerns unrelated to their gender identity or living in a gender binary system as a gender nonconforming person. When working with nonbinary clients, this is an important consideration when conceptualizing and treatment planning.

Some participants in the study discussed being gender nonconforming in childhood and adolescence and conforming to binary gender from a young age. The binary system and its rigidity made it difficult for participants to formulate their authentic identity due to dominant narratives of what it means to be cisgender or binary transgender. In regard to childhood development, clinicians should leave space for children to express gender nonconforming ideas, behaviors, and expressions. If a child does not conform to traditional rigid gender scripts, clinicians should keep the authentic gender model in mind in regard to gender identity, roles, expression, and sexuality. The spectrum of gender identity development from cisgender, to binary transgender, to nonbinary should be considered. The spectrum of gender identity development should include all the possibilities of gender identity formations.

While nonbinary is considered a young, White, academic term, that does not mean nonbinary is limited to individuals who are young, White, and immersed in higher education. When working with clients of all races, ethnicities, nationalities, ages, and levels of education

who exhibit some of the themes listed in the Findings section, clinicians should keep in mind that nonbinary may be a better way to conceptualize a client's gender identity, although that might not be the language a person is using based on other intersecting identities. Some communities and cultures might not have access to the terms nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, and so forth, but nonbinary should be considered in conceptualizing them if it fits these people based on their gender identity presentation.

Although the themes in the Findings section were placed in a chronological, linear order, the participants' narratives were not linear. The purpose of this study was not to homogenize people with nonbinary identities, or to imply there is a one size fits all stage model for how nonbinary gender identity develops. It is important for clinicians to take away from this study that gender identity development is nonlinear, complex, and unique for every single person.

Nonbinary is a gender identity label, that is, a felt experience incorporating a person's psychological, emotional, physical, and political standing. Transgender is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of gender identities and nonbinary is a separate construct under the umbrella term of transgender that also contains a variety of gender identities. There is no right way to be nonbinary, no archetype of what it means to be nonbinary, look nonbinary, or act nonbinary. Thus, clinicians should not make assumptions about people based on nonbinary gender identity labels or assume that someone is nonbinary because a person is gender nonconforming in one way or another. Clinicians should ask clients about preferred gender identity labels, gender pronouns, and what labels and pronouns mean to them.

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**Appendix A1****Chart of Themes**

<b>Themes of Identity Development:</b>
1. Acknowledging self as different from others
2. Discomfort and confusion surrounding Gender Identity & Sex Assigned at birth
3. Recognizing bodily manifestations of gender identity
4. Identifying with “opposite” binary gender
5. Mirroring people with queer identities: friends/internet/media
6. Conforming to binary gender
7. Rejection of binary gender norms and scripts
8. Identifying gender as a performance
9. Exploring with different gender labels and identifiers
10. Embracing masculinity and femininity
11. Feeling authenticity in flexibility and fluidity

<b>Themes of Other Considerations:</b>
1. Influence of systems, society, and culture
2. Gender dysphoria and mental health
3. Fear or hesitance around gender expression
4. Mediator among those with varying gender identities

**Appendix A2****Chart of Themes**

<b>Major Themes:</b>
1. Discomfort and confusion surrounding Gender Identity & Sex Assigned at birth
2. Recognizing bodily manifestations of gender identity
3. Identifying with “opposite” binary gender
4. Conforming to binary gender
5. Rejection of binary gender norms and scripts
6. Identifying gender as a performance
7. Exploring with different gender labels and identifiers
8. Embracing masculinity and femininity
9. Influence of systems, society, and culture
10. Gender dysphoria and mental health
11. Fear or hesitance around gender expression

<b>Minor Themes:</b>
1. Acknowledging self as different from others
2. Mirroring people with queer identities: friends/internet/media
3. Feeling authenticity in flexibility and fluidity
4. Mediator among those with varying gender identities

## Appendix B

### Theme Comparison Chart

Theme in Nonbinary Gender Identity Development	Related Theme(s) in Stage Models
Acknowledging self as different from others	Abiding Anxiety (Devor, 2004) Awareness (Lev, 2004)
Discomfort and confusion surrounding Gender Identity & Sex Assigned at birth	Identity Confusion About Originally Assigned Gender and Sex (Devor, 2004)
Recognizing bodily manifestations of gender identity	Identity Comparisons About Originally Assigned Gender and Sex (Devor, 2004)
Identifying with “opposite” binary gender	Same-Sex Attractions/Behaviors/Relationships (Fox, 2003) Pre-coming out (Bockting & Coleman, 2007)
Mirroring people with queer identities: friends/internet/media	Discovery of Transsexualism or Transgenderism (Devor, 2004) Seeking Information (witnessing and mirroring) (Lev, 2004)
Conforming to binary gender	Identity Confusion about Transgender Identity (Devor, 2004) Identity Comparison about Transgender Identity (Devor 2004) First Opposite-Sex Attractions/Behaviors/Relationships (Fox, 2003)
Rejection of binary gender norms and scripts	Identity Confusion about Transgender Identity (Devor, 2004) Identity Comparison about Transgender Identity (Devor 2004) First Same-Sex Attractions/Behaviors/Relationships (Fox, 2003)
Identifying gender as a performance	Exploration: Identity and Self-labelling (Lev, (2004)

<b>Theme in Nonbinary Gender Identity Development</b>	<b>Related Theme(s) in Stage Models</b>
Exploring with different gender labels and identifiers	Exploration: Identity and Self-labelling (Lev, (2004) Exploration (Bockting & Coleman, 2007)
Embracing masculinity and femininity	Tolerance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity (Devor, 2004) First self-identification as bisexual stage (Fox, 2003)
Feeling authenticity in flexibility and fluidity	Acceptance (Devor, 2004) Integration phase (Lev, 2004) Integration (Bockting & Coleman, 2007)

## Appendix C

### Semistructured Interview Guide (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000)

1. Tell me your life story in general.
  1. Is there anything else you want to say?
2. Tell me about any moments of tension or epiphanies in your life in general.
  1. Is there anything else you want to say?
3. Tell me relevant factors that contribute to your life story in general.
  1. Is there anything else you want to say?
4. Tell me your life story related to your nonbinary gender identity formation.
  1. Is there anything else you want to say?
5. Tell me about any moments of tension or epiphanies about your nonbinary gender identity.
  1. Is there anything else you want to say?
6. Tell me relevant factors that contribute to your nonbinary gender identity.
  1. Is there anything else you want to say?